

BLUE BOOK

Stories of adventure for MEN, by MEN



December

25 Cents

A Book-Length Novel, Complete

Forty Whacks by Geoffrey Homes

One was fatal, in this mystery by the man who gave us "Finders Keepers."

The Remarkable Talent of Egbert Haw

In this veracious chronicle, a talking race-horse calls "Whoa!" to his rival.

by Nelson Bond

I Fought Von Richthofen,

by Arch Whitehouse

A pilot with sixteen victories to his credit battles the famous Red Baron.

Mutiny Takes the Helm,

by Michael Gallister

Refugees taking wealth from America start another war on the 1941 Atlantic.

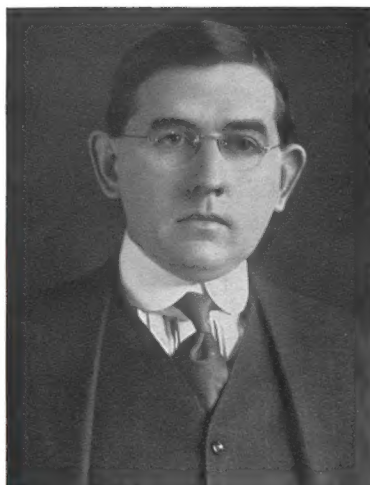
And many others (see back cover)

Who's Who In This Issue

PETER B. KYNE

THE old master who wrote "Cappy Ricks" and "The Valley of the Giants" needs little introduction to you. Like the other writers on this page, he was born in California—San Francisco. Prominent episodes in his vivid career, aside from his great success as a writer, have been his army service in the Philippines and as an

artillery officer in the World War. We like to recall some of Peter Kyne's many Blue Book titles: "Big Tim Meagher" (1916), "The New Partner," "The Widow's Mite," "The Sheriff of Panamint," "General McNeil Plays a Hunch," and "Misery Bails out" (1940). Don't miss "The Sheriff of Los Blancos," (beginning on page 20)



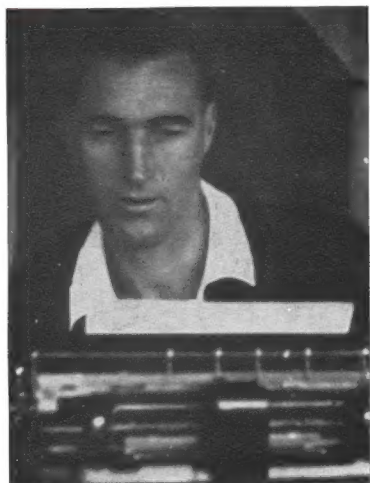
PETER B. KYNE

RALPH CONDON

BORN and raised on a California ranch: Following that, and in somewhere near the order mentioned, although the dates and durations of those pursuits are somewhat foggy in my mind, I was: a garage-hand, truck-driver, oil-worker, rancher, flunky in a lumber-camp, tractor-driver, rancher again, mine mucker, newspaper reporter, salesman, newspaper reporter again, associate editor of a New York magazine which "folded," and lastly, back to the writing business, at which I had labored since the oil-worker era.

On looking over the foregoing, I see only hash—made more of potatoes than meat and of doubtful seasoning—but such as it is, it is my hash, and I made it myself.

Future hash, however, I trust will not only be better balanced but better cooked, because I have a wife who not only is vastly smarter than I am, but she can ski better than I can. This last is a shameful admission, but at least I have the satisfaction of knowing that compared with me, she is still just a raw hand with a fly-rod.



RALPH CONDON

GEOFFREY HOMES

GEOFFREY HOMES, author of "Forty Whacks," started writing mysteries because of a semicolon. Some years back he was a rewrite man for a Los Angeles newspaper. Got into an argument with the managing editor over the proper use of semicolons, which ended in both agreeing that Homes should go to the cashier and get his time. So he went home, and wrote "The Man Who Murdered Himself." That was in 1934. "Forty Whacks" is his eighth "whodunit." Homes insists he was right in the semicolon argument.

"But editors are strange fellows," he says. "You can't convince them of anything."

Homes is a native Californian. Born in the Sierra foothills in 1902 near a town called Squaw Valley; went to school in Fresno, graduated from Fresno State College and got a job teaching agriculture in Los Angeles. Lasted a year. "The members of the

board of education were unanimous in thinking I knew nothing about agriculture," he says. So he became a reporter. He thinks the most exciting thing that happened to him in the newspaper business was the time he covered a poultry show for the *Examiner*.

"Mr. Hearst spotted me," he explains. "Told me to get a moving-van and take all the chickens to San Simeon. It seems he had bought out the show. I didn't argue. The trip took two days, and the hardest part of it was trying to keep the van driver from stopping alongside the road and cooking one of the five-hundred-dollar roosters."

For the past year, Homes has been living in a cabin near Northfork, Madera County. His wife, Sally, is an ex-dancer. "She used to work for the Shuberts," he says. "Sometimes I think she feels that the Shuberts weren't so bad after all."



GEOFFREY HOMES

READERS' FORUM

IT GOES DOUBLE

This is a good one, so I thought I would pass it on to you. I am sure you will appreciate it.

Near our home is a "super-market." They have placed a large box at the entrance, with an inscription on the outside which reads, "Please drop your discarded magazines in this box for our boys in the training-camps."

One day last week I saw an elderly gentleman place two of this month's BLUE BOOKS in the box.

I was interested, so I asked him why he put two of the same magazine in the box.

He shook his finger at me and said: "Young lady, I have two grandsons in training-camps. When they were home, first one then the other read the stories from that magazine to me, and we had a good time and enjoyed them immensely. Now that they are gone, I send them each one every month, and I figure if the BLUE BOOK is good enough for my grandsons, it's good enough for other people's grandsons."

*Mrs. Ruth Bedsworth,
Kansas City, Mo.*

(Continued on inside back cover)

Statement of the Ownership, Management, Circulation, Etc., required by the Acts of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933,

of THE BLUE BOOK MAGAZINE published monthly at Dayton, Ohio, for October 1, 1941.

State of New York, County of New York, ss.

Before me, a Notary in and for the State and County aforesaid, personally appeared John D. Hartman, who, having been duly sworn according to law, depose and says that he is the Treasurer of McCall Corporation, Publisher of The Blue Book Magazine and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, etc., of the aforesaid publication for the time shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business manager are: Publisher: McCall Corporation, 230 Park Avenue, New York, N. Y.; Editor: Donald Kennicott, 230 Park Avenue, New York, N. Y.; Managing Editor: None; Business Managers: None.

2. That the owner is: McCall Corporation, Wilmington, Delaware. The following are the names and addresses of stockholders holding 1 per cent or more of the capital stock of McCall Corporation: Oliver B. Capon, c/o Chase National Bank of the City of New York, Banking Department, 45th Street & Madison Avenue, New York, N. Y.; Guaranty Trust Company of New York, for c/o Irving M. Day, c/o Broadway, New York, N. Y.; Eddie S. Ebelstein & Continental Illinois National Bank and Trust Company of Chicago, c/o Louis Eckstein, Deceased, Account T, Chicago, Illinois; Hamilton Gibson, c/o The First National Bank of Orlando, Trust Department, Orlando, Florida; Kelly & Connors, c/o Guaranty Trust Company of New York, 140 Broadway, New York, N. Y.; Mausel & Company, 43 & 47 Wall Street, New York, N. Y.; Sibel Moore Warner, 158 Elderswood Avenue, Pelham, New York; William B. Warner, c/o McCall Corporation, 230 Park Avenue, New York, N. Y.; Robert Cade Wilson, c/o Irving Trust Company, Custodians Department, One Wall Street, New York, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, are true and contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for which such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

John D. Hartman, Treasurer.

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 18th day of September, 1941. Victor J. Lore, Clerk of Kings County, Kings County Clerk's No. 322, Reg. No. 2373. Certificate filed in N. Y. Co. Clks. No. 980. Reg. No. 2LS86. Commission expires March 20, 1942.

BLUE BOOK

December, 1941

MAGAZINE

Vol. 74, No. 2

A Complete Book-length Novel

Forty Whacks By Geoffrey Homes 104
Illustrated by L. R. Gustavson

A Novelette

Mutiny Takes the Helm By Michael Gallister 30
Illustrated by Frederic Anderson

Short Stories

The Sheriff of Los Brancos By Peter B. Kyne 20
Illustrated by L. R. Gustavson

The Remarkable Talent of Egbert Haw By Nelson Bond 24
Illustrated by Charles Chickering

The Talisman By William E. Barrett 47
Illustrated by Grattan Condon

The Tramp's Pug Passenger By Kerry O'Neil 53
Illustrated by Frederic Anderson

Lost Gold By Ralph Condon 64
Illustrated by Grattan Condon

No Holds Barred By D. J. King 70
Illustrated by Peter Kuhlhoff

A Son of Han By H. Bedford-Jones 96
Illustrated by Frederic Anderson

Two Serial Novels

The Princess and the Prophet By Gordon Keyne 2
Illustrated by John Richard Flanagan

The Iron Rainbow (Conclusion) By Gordon Young 72
Illustrated by Raymond Sisley

Special Features

High Lights of the New Books By Mikhail Sholokhov 60
IX—"The Don Flows Home to the Sea"

(Copyright, 1940, by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc. Excerpts reprinted by special permission.)

The Italian Nobleman By Agatha Christie 93
Twice Told Tales from Blue Book—IV

Readers' Forum 1

Prize Stories of Real Experience

I Fought Von Richthofen By Arch Whitehouse 138

A former pilot with sixteen victories to his credit tells of his duel with the famous Red Baron.

Wolves at Sea By Otto P. Kelland 141

This Newfoundlanders went sealing on the ice and met tougher game.

Fireman's Hazard By M. H. Petty 143

When the blazing roof fell in, one man went with it—but his chief kept a hose on the spot.

Howdy, Rattler! By John J. Wallace 144

An Arizona miner climbs a cliff and for a handhold grasps—deadly danger.

Cover Design Painted by Herbert Morton Stoops

Except for stories of Real Experiences, all stories and novels printed herein are fiction and are intended as such. They do not refer to real characters or to actual events. If the name of any living person is used, it is a coincidence.



McCALL CORPORATION Publisher, The Blue Book Magazine

William B. Warner, President
Marvin Pierce, Vice-President
Malcolm MacHarg, Vice-President
Francis Hutter, Secretary
J. D. Hartman, Treasurer
DONALD KENNICOTT, Editor

Published monthly, at McCall St., Dayton, Ohio. Subscription Offices—Dayton, Ohio. Editorial and Executive Offices—230 Park Ave., New York, N. Y. THE BLUE BOOK MAGAZINE, December 1941, Vol. LXXIV, No. 2. Copyright, 1941, by McCall Corporation. All rights reserved in the United States, Great Britain, and in all countries participating in the Pan American Copyright Convention and the International Copyright Union. Reprinting not permitted except by special authorization. Subscription Prices, one year \$2.50, two years \$4.00. Extra in Canada, 50 cents per year; foreign, \$1.00 per year. For change of address, give us four weeks' notice and send old address as well as new. Special Notice to Writers and Artists: Manuscripts and art material submitted for publication in the Blue Book Magazine will be received only on the understanding that the publisher and editors shall not be responsible for loss or injury thereto while such manuscripts or art material are in the publisher's possession or in transit.

Entered as second-class matter, November 12, 1930, at the Post Office at Dayton, Ohio, under the Act of March 3, 1879.

Printed in U.S.A.

The Princess



Illustrated
by John
Richard
Flanagan

IN the courtyard of the post tavern at Chouzy, the first crossroads outside Blois, a dreadful thing was taking place, and going from bad to worse: A dog was held by two lengths of rope about his neck. One ran to the pump, the other to a hook in the stable wall. Both were taut. Thus, the dog could move scarcely at all to either side, and only slightly forward or back.

He was a great gaunt dog, with long lean head and long curled tail. He was plastered with filth; his coat was matted with briars and brush and blood. Red streaks of bloody flesh showed through his dark fur, and blood drib-

bled down his legs to the cobblestones. He stood at the point of fury, eyes rolling savagely and lips curled back to show white fangs—but he was quite helpless.

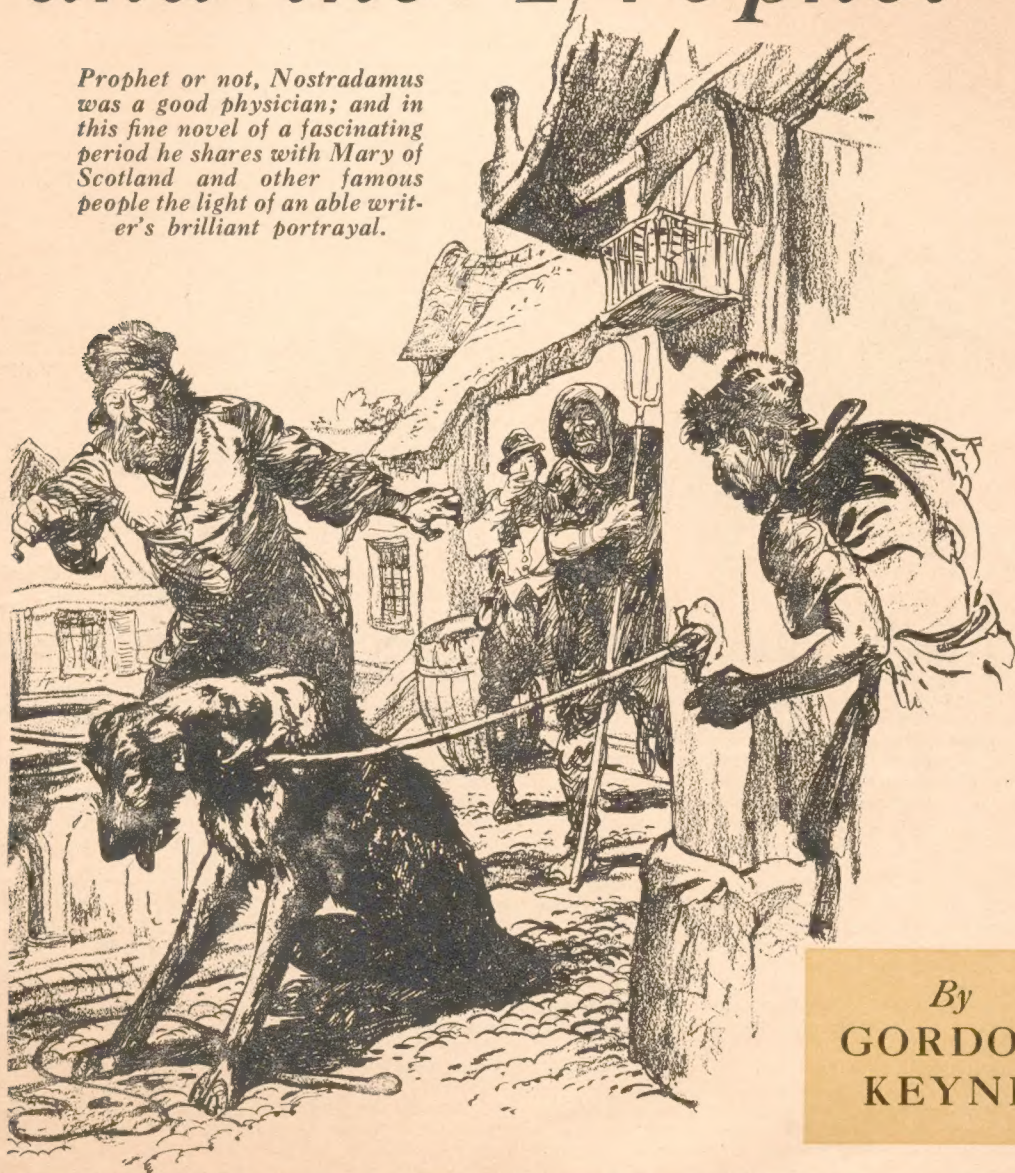
The innkeeper spoke uneasily, as he looked on.

"Better send for a pike or a boar-spear, Jacques! You'll never kill him with that whip."

The burly, bearded Jacques held a long-thonged whip of braided leather. He glared at the dog; the beast growled murderously, with such terrific pent ferocity that Jacques fell back a step. Furious drunken speech poured from him in a torrent.

and the Prophet

Prophet or not, Nostradamus was a good physician; and in this fine novel of a fascinating period he shares with Mary of Scotland and other famous people the light of an able writer's brilliant portrayal.



By
**GORDON
KEYNE**

"I'll kill him, never fear. He's mine to do with, by the saints! I found him in my fowl-yard with half a dozen hens dead and eaten; and his life pays for it. Some kind of wolf, no doubt. A devil's in him!"

"More truth than poetry to that," said the innkeeper, crossing himself. "A devil is in his eye, surely! Why not let him be judged and killed by the provost?"

"Because I want that pleasure myself," snarled Jacques, a peasant by his garb. He coiled the whip and lashed out.

The dog could not evade. Plunging on his rope, he took the blow, gave no sign of pain, but fastened his lambent

eyes on the man and voiced a low growl so deadly that the watching grooms cried anew that Satan was indeed in him. He eyed Jacques as a man would do, tensely, with a personal hatred.

"Well, well, *mes amis*!" exclaimed a hearty voice. "Honest Frenchmen at your pleasure, eh? No welcome for travelers? No itching palm for minted coin? The world must be coming to an end, indeed!"

Everyone turned. Even Jacques swung around, all astare. Into the courtyard had come a stoutly built, powerful man with grizzled beard and big nose and bold eyes, leading a



"I am a physician
—by name Michel
de Notre-dame."

horse. On the horse sat another, younger man, drooping in the saddle. Little of his face was visible, thanks to a blood-stained bandage about his eyes and head. Tied to the saddle was a sword, and beside it a quiver of long shafts and a long bow in its case.

The grooms sprang to assist; the innkeeper hurried forward. The big man helped his companion from the saddle, led him to the pump, and put his hand on it. Obviously, the younger man was blind. Now he spoke, but not in French.

"What is going on here, Angus Dhu? Was it a dog I heard growling?"

"Aye; these French peasants are as bad as English—always killing something. Now wait here, Malcolm, till I get us settled and learn if they can get a surgeon from Blois." Black Angus beckoned the innkeeper and slapped the fat purse at his girdle, and spoke in fluent but badly accented French.

"Now, good host, show me your rooms! One of the best, mind. Have a drawer bring wine to my friend, while we're gone. We met robbers in the woods—killed three of them; but a broken sword has left my comrade hurt and blinded. Come along. . . . Your best rooms, mind!"

They departed inside the inn. A drawer came out with a pewter cup of wine and gave it to the hurt man, who thanked him in excellent French. Slightly bearded, this blind Malcolm, wearing a leather surcoat stained by armor and weather. He stood at the pump and drank the wine, then faced around at queer sounds.

Jacques, coiling his whip anew, began to lash out at the dog, cursing him the while. The animal crouched, belly to stones, growling but not whimpering as the thong slashed into him cruelly. Suddenly, unexpectedly, he flew into life.

Too rapidly for eye to follow, he caught the lash between his jaws as it landed. He caught it, jerked it, pulled it from the hand of Jacques. He gathered the whip beneath him. Astounded, Jacques bellowed oaths while the

grooms fell to laughing. One of them got a pole and began to scrape at the whip, raking it away from the dog's paws.

Blind Malcolm left the pump and moved toward the sounds.

"Here, here, what are you doing?" he demanded. "Whipping a dog? Torturing him? That's not man's work, my friends!"

Sharp cries of warning arose. For with hands outstretched, he was moving directly at the animal. His foot struck against the rope; grasping it, he moved on toward the dog. No one dared to intervene.

"The beast will tear out his throat!" cried a tap-boy, horrified. "Stop him, stop him! You, monsieur! For God's love, turn again!"

The dog crouched, with savage tense growl. Malcolm, almost beside him, paused, reached down, and laughed.

"What's this, beastie?" His words came not in French, but in English. "Are these French rascals tormenting you also? Then we're both fallen among evil hands. And we both need help, God knows!"

The dog rose upright, abandoning the whip, so that the groom raked it clear of him. The great beast stood waist-high to Malcolm; instead of flying at the outstretched hand of the Scot, a low sound like a groan escaped him, and he thrust his nose into the reaching palm.

"Devil take me if you don't understand English speech, eh?" exclaimed Malcolm, and stroked the long head and neck. "What's this? Blood?"

Jacques, however, whip in hand once more, turned to those around.

"You hear? You hear?" he demanded. "A damned foreigner? Aye, an outlander by his speech! Satan is in him as well; look how the dog knows him!"

Amazed cries broke from the others, seeing man and dog at peace and understanding. Jacques, however, bared his teeth in a burst of rage.

"You, foreigner!" he bellowed angrily. "Away from the devil's beast, away from him! Stand aside, while I rip the life out of him!"

"Peace, whoever you are," responded Malcolm. "Yours is the devil's work, it would seem; the dog's a friendly soul. Leave him alone. When my comrade returns—"

"The beast is mine, not yours!" burst forth Jacques. "Away from him! He's mine to kill—ha! Take your hand away from those ropes!" he added in sharp alarm, as Malcolm's fingers found the knots about the dog's neck. "Fool, leave them be! Don't dare to turn him loose! Hands off—hands off, or I'll teach you a lesson!"

What with hatred of foreigners, fear, anger and cruel resolve, the bearded Jacques flew into a tempestuous passion. He lashed out with insensate frenzy. The whip curled about dog and man. Malcolm shouted at him, turned and staggered toward him, cursing him in helpless rage. Jacques backed away, but struck again, desperately trying to check this bandaged figure. He struck again and again, while Malcolm drove at him.

IN the midst of this scene, Black Angus came bursting out of the tavern with a roar of dismay and fury. Too late! Blinded though he was, Malcolm reached the burly peasant and grappled him, tearing the whip from him. A knife slid into the peasant's hand, and he launched a deadly thrust—only to have knife and arm knocked aside as Black Angus hurtled into him.

"Here's what you seek, madman!" cried the Scot, whipping out his dagger. "And what you want, you shall have to the hilt!"

Whether drunk or sober, the bearded Jacques was by this time a madman indeed. He hurled himself upon Angus, screaming imprecations. The two figures came together. After a moment the knife tinkled on the stones, and the burly peasant staggered backward, clutching at his chest; Black Angus, with poniard reddened, flung a harsh word at him.

"Fool! Steel is my business, not yours. Give my compliments to your master the devil!"

Jacques coughed something; his knees loosened, and he fell on his face and was quiet. A groom ran to him, half turned him over, then let him slip down again, and furtively crossed himself. Silence fell on the courtyard and upon the staring men.

ANGUS went to Malcolm, slipped an arm around him, and walked him to the bench beside the tavern door. He aided him to sit, and straightened up as the innkeeper came out.

"Small beginnings, grave endings," said Angus. "From the beating of a dog comes the death of a man. Who's this bearded fury, good host?"

"He belongs to the Vicomte d'Oger, monsieur," said the innkeeper, "and has a farm just outside the village. A violent and terrible man; none the less—"

"None the less," said Angus sardonically, "he is dead. Eh, Malcolm? What is it?"

The younger man had reached up, pulling at his sleeve. "The dog, Angus. Free him."

Black Angus cocked an eye at the great hound. "Be damned if I do!" said he. "That beast is dangerous."

"Not so. He understands English. Go try him yourself! I'll not stir from here till he comes with us."

Angus rolled his eyes resignedly. "I'll humor you," he growled; "but I'd not lay hand on that brute for all the wealth of St. Andrews!"

Gingerly enough, he approached the dog, stopped, and began to speak—not in English but in broad Scots. Almost instantly the ears of the beast pricked up; he stood looking at Angus, his tail lifted and wagged, and from the astonished man broke a sharp exclamation of surprise.

"He's not English, Malcolm! Scots he is—and a friend, by his eye."

"Set him free, set him free," said Malcolm impatiently. "Loose the ropes; I'll call him and he'll come to me. You'll see."

Angus was none too sure. Poniard ready, he advanced warily. The dog looked up at him, and as he later swore, smiled into his eyes. Angus put down a hand to the ropes, worked at the knots with the point of his dagger, and they came apart. Cries of fear escaped the grooms, who scattered hastily, but Malcolm called the dog and extended his hand, and the animal went to him and crouched at his feet.

The staring landlord pointed to something beside the pump.

"There is a collar that broke from him," said he to Angus. "It has a brass plate with something writ in a foreign tongue."

Angus strode over to the spot, picked up the broken piece of leather, and came back to Malcolm and the dog. He looked at the metal plate, and knit his brow.

"I can read big letters, but not script," said he. "Here are big letters first, and script afterward. Five letters, Malcolm; damn it, man, why haven't you your eyes?"

"Bad luck, Angus Dhu," said Malcolm. His lips were tightly set, as he fondled the dog's head. "Hellfire's in my head and eyes; but spell the letters. What are they?"

"T is first," replied Angus. "Then H. I know it by the cross-bar. Then an O. That's simple. Then P. . . . No, wait! It's the one like P, only different. R, that's what it is! And last comes the two strokes with the leaning bar—N, that's it. Does it make sense?"

"Thorn," said Malcolm. "Thorn! Eh? Why, the dog's head jumped up at the word!"

"He's looking up at us. By the saints, that's his name, of course! Thorn!" cried Angus, and the dog's head and gaze swung to him. "That's his name, Malcolm, Thorn! That's why it was on the collar. But the plate isn't brass. These fools took it for brass; if it's not ruddy gold, then I'm an Englishman!"

"Take care of it," said Malcolm, and sighed. "I'm done up, Angus. The pain's more than I can bear. Did ye ask about a surgeon?"

"Must send to Blois. It's not far; the court's there, and—" Angus broke off suddenly. A low oath escaped him as he swung around. "Oh, the devil! Here's trouble."

Hoofs clattered and muttered warnings flew among the grooms. Into the courtyard rode an officer, gayly resplendent, and six archers. A low word escaped the landlord.

"God save us all! The provost's lieutenant!"

The officer had seen the body of Jacques. He drew rein with a sharp cry.

"*De par le Roi!* In the King's name! What have we here, you damned rascals? Murder?" He dismounted and strode arrogantly to the landlord and Black Angus. "Speak, speak! You, landlord, you dare to kill without authority?"

"Not I, your worship, not I!" The landlord fell on his knees, stones or no stones. "The dead man is Jacques, the villain of M. d'Oger. This foreign gentleman was attacked by him, and killed him."

"Eh?" said the officer, and bent his brows upon Black Angus. "You?"

"I, monsieur," said Angus, composedly.

"Then you shall be bound and taken before the provost—"

"Not so fast, monsieur," said Angus. "Haste is a fast horse, but precaution's a better one. You've no authority to lay hand upon me, and you'd best not try."

"Indeed!" The officer regarded him with a sneer. "Indeed! You are, no doubt, the good St. Michael himself, to be independent of the authority of France, and to kill peasants who are the property of gentlemen!"

"Not St. Michael," rejoined Black Angus. "If you'd said Saint Andrew, you'd have been closer to the mark, monsieur. I'm Angus Douglas of Kilspindie, sergeant of the Scots Archer Guards, at present returning from furlough in Scotland to my duty. And I'm subject only to the authority of the Captain of the Guards, the Earl of Arran, or of His Majesty in person, or of the Dauphin or his good lady, Mary Queen of Scotland. Outside of which, you or any other authority in France will get your fingers damned well burned if you lay them on me."

An officer of the Scots Guards! That was something, indeed. It was so distinctly something, that the provost's lieutenant swallowed hard.

"Have you any proof of this claim?" he demanded.

"Certainly, under the hand of the Earl of Arran and of His Majesty as well," said Angus. He produced a folded pad of vellum. "There's my passport, and you'll note that it requires all officers of the realm to give me aid and support on demand."

THE lieutenant unfolded the vellum, glanced at the writing, and nodded. Then he looked at Angus with sudden interest.

"Can it be that you're the two gentlemen who were attacked by thieves on the road hither from Veuve, earlier in the day?"

"We are," said Angus, pocketing his passport again. "And except we were taken off our guard, there'd have been little trouble. My comrade here, Malcolm Campbell, who's on his way to take service in the Guards, was grievously hurt when his sword splintered and bits of the steel blinded him; but we killed three of the rogues."

"And wounded four others," added the lieutenant. "Word was brought of the matter, and I was sent to investigate. Well done, monsieur! You have my permission to kill a dozen peasants if you desire; you've rid us of a most troublesome gang of robbers who have plagued our roads for the past year!"

"Soft words salve no wounds," said Angus dourly. "My comrade is sore hurt. I ask your aid in sending to Blois for a surgeon. The court is at Blois, so there must be no end of doctors and surgeons about—" He broke off sharp-



*"What is it?" she went on.
"Your air is strange; you
speak strange words. Yet
Thorn says you are a friend."*

ly at a word from the innkeeper. The head of Malcolm had fallen back, and he had slumped in a faint. "The devil! Here, someone lend a hand—help carry him to our room! The dog will hurt no one. Down, Thorn! Down!"

So presently, Malcolm was carried away, with the huge dog quietly following; but Angus did not go along, for the lieutenant detained him.

"Wait, monsieur! The chateau of M. d'Oger, whose man you have just slain, is not a league from here. A physician from the court is there now as the guest of the Vicomte. I heard of it only this morning; he must be still there."

"Who is he? Maitre Ambroise Paré of Paris?"

"I do not know. But, if it please you, I'll send him at once. I'm riding there now, as I must make report of this other incident. I'll undertake to have him here well inside the hour."

Angus seized his hand. "Good! Thanks, with all my heart, monsieur! Do this, and if ever you have need of a friend, come to me and I'll serve you to the utmost!"

Angus departed to the side of his comrade, well pleased; he needed help imperatively, and any of the court surgeons or physicians would be excellent. The lieutenant mounted and clattered off with his men, equally delighted; an officer of the Scots Guards could be a bad enemy but a most valuable friend.

The dead man lying on the cobblestones was forgotten. He was of no importance to anyone, except perhaps to the Vicomte d'Oger, who could replace him very easily. Yet in his death, the bearded and violent Jacques had served as an essential cog in the grinding mechanism of destiny.

In these days when blood and war and ruin swept the world, destiny often depended upon such trifles. It was the spring of the year 1559. A woman of twenty-six had just recently become Queen of England. A girl of seventeen, already Queen of Scotland, was soon to become Queen of France as well, and had a better claim to the English throne than its incumbent. Assassination, treachery, bloodshed, were everywhere; law was prostrate, justice a mockery; religious strife was rising to fury. Only the strong could survive, or so men said.

Yet this whole savage warring scene was actually being managed by the slender fingers of women. It was they who pulled the strings, to which danced puppet statesmen and warriors and kings. Behind the scenes, they ruled the social world, and upon the stage it was they whose abilities were dominant, with three of them predominant above all the others—Elizabeth in England, Diane de Poitiers in France, and Catherine de Medici in her own place.



"Madame, I put my life in your hands," he said. "I'm Malcolm Campbell. . . Unless you can help me, I'm a lost man—and Scotland is lost with me!"

Black Angus thought of these things as he sat watching at the bedside of his comrade. He thought of Scotland, which he had just now seen given over to fire and sword, to murder and plunder and factions. He washed the wounds of the great dog and thought of men broken on the wheel for opinions, or burned alive for their beliefs.

"The world's a damned sorry place," he told himself, and wagged his grizzled beard, and looked at the flushed face of the unconscious man on the pillow. "The greater rascal a man is, the greater lord he becomes; a prince is another name for a scoundrel. What in hell's name is the use of being honest and true and brave, when the only good woman in France is the King's mistress, and the only future open to a soldier is to betray his master or break his oaths? What's the use of decency, anyway?"

HE grunted. Then, leaning forward, he felt under the leather jacket of the unconscious Malcolm and touched something there, sewn to the leather.

"There's wealth," he said. "And a title of nobility, the captaincy of an army, anything the heart of a man could

desire. Merely for a broken oath and honor laid aside. Why not? There's no honor left in the world, and damned little decency. Why not chuck it all and take what could be had for the asking?"

The answer to his temptation and to his questioning was at this moment approaching. He heard a coach roll into the courtyard, and knew that the physician had arrived; and he came to his feet expectantly.

But Thorn, the Irish wolfhound, rose stiffly and stretched his great length and height to full size, and his shining intelligent eyes were fastened upon the door as it opened, as though he had risen in homage to some presence more than mortal.

It was, however, only a man in a black gown and the square biretta of a doctor, who stood there.

In this moment Black Angus of Kilspindie had a queer impulse to salute this man with deference; he fought back the impulse. The physician's impressive air was hard to define; he was not a tall man. Gray-bearded, very

ruddy and hearty of cheek, bright and piercing of black eye, long of nose, the visitor met the gaze of Black Angus and nodded pleasantly.

"So this is the place," he said in French, with a distinct accent. "A man hurt?"

"My comrade," Angus replied, indicating the bed. "His sword broke as he warding a blow; the splinters blinded him. I have done what I could."

The visitor halted and looked at Thorn, who pricked up ears and wagged tail.

"So!" said the deep, pleasant voice. "There are two who have need of me; perhaps all three! Who is this young man?"

"A recruit, coming to join the Scots Guards," said Angus. "And who are you?"

The visitor looked at him for a moment, a quiet, contemplative moment.

"Friend," he answered at length, "I am a physician, by name Michel de Notredame. And I will thank you to observe one thing: the truth."

ANGUS swallowed hard, then stood rebuked and silent. A servant entered, bringing warm water and cloths. Maitre Notredame drew a stool to the bedside, sat down, and began very carefully to remove Malcolm Campbell's bandage.

"How was he hurt?" he questioned, and Angus told him, repeating his words. Notredame shook his head slightly, cleansed the wound, made a lengthy examination, and looked up. "My pupil and assistant, Brion, is outside. Kindly tell him to enter."

Angus went to the door. Another man stood waiting in the corridor; a younger man, with pointed beard and sparkling eyes, who came in and handed his master a case of instruments and tiny vials. He, too, leaned over and examined the wound with care.

"Luckily, he is unconscious," he remarked. "The eyes are not injured, master, but it is a delicate matter. Do you wish me to get out the splinters?"

"No, my dear Actæus," said the physician. "No. This young man is of the greatest importance to the world. Prepare everything; the work is mine."

He rolled back his sleeves and fell to work upon the wound. The skin and flesh above the eyes was torn and ragged and badly messed about by the ministrations of Angus. With deft fingers, Notredame worked upon the hurt. His instruments glittered like needles. He drew out tiny slivers of steel, he explored the flesh, he cleansed it again; then went to work replacing the skin. All the while, Malcolm lay senseless and Black Angus stared hard. At length, Notredame nodded and straightened up.

"Now the bandage, Actæus," he said. "And first, the salve of Avicenna. Sit here. I'll take the dog in charge—"

"No, no, master!" exclaimed Brion, whom the physician called by the intimate name of Actæus. "A dog? Such work is not for you. Let the beast wait for me."

"This is no beast," said Notredame, leaving the stool and stooping to examine the hurts of Thorn, who nuzzled his hand. "This is one of those rare animals that approach the human strength of spirit and intelligence. What sort of dog is he, good soldier?"

"An Irish wolfhound, I'd say," rejoined Angus dourly. "My friend and I are Scots."

"So I understood." The physician smiled at the dog and began his work. "Foreigners in this pleasant land of France, all of us. I myself am from Provence, this hound from Ireland, you from Scotland."

"And the Queen, from Italy," said Angus, under his breath. Notredame glanced up.

"The Queen? Oh, Catherine de Medici, yes. A great woman, in her way; she will rule France; yet France will never belong to her. Are you going back to Scotland soon?"

"I've just been there, on furlough," Angus said shortly.

"Indeed!" Notredame, while he spoke, was anointing the wounds of Thorn with salve and cleansing them. "And you do not know where the dog came from?"

"No. Who told you that?"

Notredame smiled, and stooped to lift the broken collar that lay on the floor.

"Thorn is my name," he said, reading the inscription.

Angus started. "So you speak English? You read it? Does it give the name of any owner?"

"That is all it says." Notredame, having finished his task, watched Brion for a moment. The bandage was adjusted. Malcolm still lay unconscious. From among his vials the healer selected several and mixed a potion in a silver cup he took from a case. "Give your friend six drops of this in water, not in wine, every hour. Here is a quill to measure the drops. Pour it between his lips. With morning, his fever will be gone. In two days, he will leave his bed and go on to Blois with you. In a week, only the scar will remain; and it will vanish soon. But he must come to me when you reach Blois, that I may treat the wound again."

"His eyes?" questioned Angus.

"They're not hurt." Notredame put the cup aside and nodded to his assistant. "Wait for me in the coach, Actæus; we'll go back to Blois from here."

Sunset was approaching. The room was filled with ruddy light. Brion departed; the physician leaned back in his chair, his long, slim hands quiver in his lap, his gaze fixed on Black Angus. It was a calm, meditative gaze, searching yet serene. The very essence of the man was composure, an absolute composure eloquent of inward power.

Thorn came to him, put his head on his knee, and licked his hand. Notredame paid no heed, but continued to study Black Angus reflectively.

"Well?" broke out the Scot. "There's nothing wrong with me, at least."

"Much," said Notredame gravely. "But first, there is so much to say! These are strange times, when such a man as you, the very soul of honor and loyalty, could be tempted to betray his trust."

The rugged features of Angus set hard; had it been possible, he would have turned pale, but he was not that type.

"What do you mean?" he demanded gruffly.

The calm voice spoke on: "Henri II is the king; his queen is Catherine de Medici; his son François is the Dauphin, married to Mary Stuart, Queen of Scotland. These two, a boy and a girl, are heirs of destiny, my friend, children of ill fortune. Henri is a good man, a strong king. His mistress, Diane de Poitiers, is one of the wisest and noblest women in the world, and by her counsel France is ruled. In spite of her, all about us is corruption and treachery and intrigue. You may well ask what is the use of honor and loyalty!"

"I did not!" Angus started slightly. "I asked you nothing, physician."

"Then ask yourself, soldier. What's the use of loyalty to a doomed cause? What's the use of honor, when leaders are dishonored? What's the use of fighting, when the enemy outnumber you?"

Tiny beads of sweat broke out on the brow of Angus.

"That's enough!" he said hoarsely. "Are you man or devil?"

"A physician; you yourself named me." Notredame nodded. "And a friend. Now look, soldier! Harken while I resolve the mystery, though I fear you'll not comprehend my words. You hear my words, not my thoughts. Yet thoughts are actual things like words. Thoughts are a force, an exertion of energy. Sometimes, though very rarely, a man can feel and understand them, as other men hear words. I am one of those rare persons."

"Devil's work!" muttered Angus, eyes wide.

"No. All that is noble is God's work, comprehended in two words *courage* and *faith*. Bear this in mind, soldier." The physician rose and extended his hand. "Farewell.

Bring your friend to me at Blois in three days. Either I or Brion will see to the wound there. And keep a stout heart!"

Black Angus gripped the long, firm hand. He sought for words and found none, and in silence saw the visitor depart. Then he wiped the sweat from his brow, felt a touch, and looked down to see Thorn nuzzling him, looking up at him.

"Stout heart!" he muttered. "You, Thorn, are great of heart yourself; you shame me. How the devil did he know what I'd been thinking about? Well, best get busy with that medicine, I suppose."

He prepared the dose and trickled it between Malcolm's lips. The younger man opened his mouth; his fingers gripped on those of Angus, and he spoke.

"You, Angus? I'm burning up; a touch of fever. But the pain's all gone."

"Then sleep and gain strength. Your eyes are not injured; the physician says you'll be all right in a couple of days."

Malcolm sighed and smiled, and slept. But Angus looked out at the gathering darkness and stroked his grizzled beard, and frowned.

"Who is he? How does he know so much?" he muttered. "Flesh and blood, by his grip, yet more than mortal man by his words. When I told him Malcolm was a recruit, he gave me the lie! He knew; but how did he know? Who'll tell me that, now?"

At all events, his temptation was clean gone; the very thought of it made him snort with scorn. Black Angus of Kilsplindie was himself again.

CHAPTER TWO

BLOIS was intolerably crowded.

Gone were the days of King François, who dragged from one royal residence to another an attendant court of twelve thousand souls. Under the businesslike rule of Diane de Poitiers, inefficiency and graft were cut to a minimum; none the less, Henri II loved magnificence, and the size of his court left few empty beds in the royal chateau or the town.

Black Angus had good reason not to seek the guards' barracks at present. Therefore he got a temporary room in the town, and after a long night's sleep, accompanied Malcolm Campbell in search of the physician Notre-dame. The latter's lodgings were soon found, for he was a man of great note, the most famed physician in all France.

Notre-dame they found not, but Brion was there, and he saw to Campbell's wound. A merry fellow, this Brion, who jested right and left, removed the bandages and replaced them with a heavy strip of plaster, and gravely asked after the health of the dog Thorn.

"He's doing well; we left him in our room," said Campbell. "What's that on the wall, a mirror? The first I've seen in France! Now for a squint at myself, Angus."

He looked, and did not know himself. The plaster disfigured him. In place of the shaven, high-boned features he knew so well, with the gray eyes glittering under straight black brows, he beheld a face blurred by dark beard in ragged lengths. He had not shaven since leaving Scotland. He gave Angus a wry grimace.

"Safe enough, eh? At least, until I've done what I came to do."

"Careful, messieurs," intervened Brion with a gay chuckle. "I warn you that I speak English, so tell no secrets! Also, my master left a message for you," he said, turning to Campbell. "For three days you're not to leave your room, except after dark. On the fourth day, remove the plaster from the wound and then seek her whose mother sent you."

At these words, Campbell felt his heart contract for an instant. He shot a glance at Black Angus.



"Monsieur, what is your desire?" asked Diane.

"You talked? You told him, then?"

"Upon my honor, I told him nothing!" exclaimed Angus, equally startled. "Did I not say he knew everything? This is like the things he said to me at the tavern."

"Master Brion, what did your master mean by those words?" Campbell demanded.

Brion shrugged. "A wise man never asks Maitre whence came his knowledge! From the stars, perhaps, since he's a famed astrologer. I only deliver the message, monsieur."

"Very well. As I may not be in France very long, let me pay your master's fee now."

"He said that you could pay it at your next meeting, monsieur. He said you would meet him again where you least expect it."

"Thank you. Good day." With a brusque gesture to Angus, Campbell strode out of the room, out of the house, and paused not until they stood in the street. Then he turned to his companion, making no secret of his alarm.

"Angus, something has slipped; perhaps word has got here ahead of us. We know English spies are everywhere, their agents are everywhere. This doctor probably is a friend and has taken this way of warning us."

"Like enough." Black Angus looked troubled. "Well, with that patch, that leathern coat, and that beard, you look like any rascally countryman. As you see, beards are in fashion here. You're safe from recognition, so go back to our room and wait. I'll gather news and be along presently. Good advice, to venture out only at night!"

"But how the devil am I to reach the Queen, in secret?"

"Wait and see. I can manage that for you, once I return to duty."

They separated, Campbell retracing his steps to their lodging where he kicked off his shoes, loosened his doublet, and disposed himself comfortably. Thorn stretched out at his side, and Campbell's hand strayed over the long lean head affectionately.

Thorn was still very stiff from his hurts, but his famished look was gone, and his neatly brushed coat lent him an entirely new appearance—an air of dignity, of breeding, of alert nobility.

"You're a prince among dogs, old fellow," murmured Campbell. "And devil take it, I'm a dog among princes!"

One suspicion of my errand, and my life's not worth a groat. And here this doctor's assistant blurts it out to my face! This place is filled with Scots and with English, with lords and princes of France, and none of them to be trusted. Devil a one! Yet I must reach the Queen, for Scotland's at stake!"

He was a different person now from the drooping wounded man of the highway. Strength was back in him, the gray eyes were alight with youth and energy and shrewdness; when he moved, his step had the balance and precision of trained muscles and alert fighting ability.

When the door burst open, Campbell glanced up quietly. Angus came in, breathing hard.

"Now the devil's to pay! However, I've got the mystery solved."

"Sit down and catch your breath," said Campbell. "There's wine; I'll drink with you. Bad news can wait."

"This can't," growled Angus. None the less, he crossed to the table, poured wine into two mugs, and brought one of them to Campbell. He emptied the other at one quaff. "My fault, comrade," he said. "At the crossroads tavern, I told that provost's officer our names: A sad mistake—not for my sake, but for yours. I met a couple of comrades from the Guards; they tipped me off the captain's watching the roads for you. We must have slipped into town by sheer good luck. No one's looking for me, it seems; just for you."

Campbell frowned, puzzled. "What captain?"

"Why, the Captain of the Scots Guards, man! The Earl of Arran. Hamilton, head of the house of Hamilton, next in line to the throne of Scotland, after Mary Stuart!"

Campbell caught his breath. "Good Lord! Then the worst has happened; we've been betrayed at the other end; a messenger has come through ahead of us!"

"Obviously."

"Get back to your duty, then. You're safe. Wash your hands of me—"

"Go to the devil," snapped Black Angus, and dropped into a chair. "My leave has three days to run; I stick with you. But that's not the worst. The Dauphin hasn't yet arrived; he is on the way from Fontainebleau to join the court. Mary Stuart is with him, naturally."

Campbell's heart sank. "Bad luck. My errand is to her, or to Madame Diane."

"Oh, she's here right enough! And the King," said Angus. "Look, d'ye see why that physician knew so much? He had picked up word. These surgeons and barbers and doctors hear all secrets. His warning was good; stay indoors. Queen Mary will be here in three days, and that's what he meant. He's a friend, right enough."

"I dare not wait three days," said Campbell slowly. "But you can't help me reach Diane de Poitiers."

"No," said Angus gloomily. "Only a Frenchman of the court could help you there, and you can't trust any damned Frenchman. Or can you?"

Campbell shook his head. So Hamilton, the Earl of Arran, Captain of the Scots Guards, knew of his errand! This was frightful news.

His thoughts went back to Leith in Scotland, and to the indomitable, stern woman he had left there struggling to hold the Stuart inheritance together: Mary of Guise, Regent of Scotland for her daughter Mary Stuart, a woman of the lion's breed, a true Guise. No one could be trusted, she had warned him solemnly. No Frenchman; not her own brothers, not the Duke nor the Cardinal of Lorraine. He remembered her very words.

"Only one of two persons, Monsieur Campbell! Only my daughter Mary Stuart, Queen of France; if you cannot reach her, get the message to the Duchess de Valentinois, Diane de Poitiers, beloved of Henri II—the wisest woman in France, the most able, the most powerful. She has been as a mother to my own daughter, Mary. Trust her. No one else, not the Dauphin, not the King himself! And God preserve you."

Black Angus jerked up his head. "We've had no supper. I'll order it at once."

"I've ordered it. Compose yourself," said Campbell. "You don't know the details of my errand, Angus."

"No. I don't want to know 'em. Must be something big, if Arran, or Hamilton as the English call him, wants to wring your neck."

"Right. If he fails, he loses his own neck. I must reach Diane de Poitiers tonight or tomorrow. I must!"

"As well hope to reach the moon, as the King's mistress," Angus said gloomily.

"Well, think! There must be some way. Here's supper, and high time too. I'll take Thorn out for a walk when it's dark; does me good to be on my feet. I may think of something," said Campbell, and said no more. Two of the servants from the tavern at the corner were at the door with the dinner he had ordered. It would not be wise to let them hear foreign tongues in speech. Everyone was a spy in Blois, these days. . . .

The dinner was served; the wine was poured; the two servants departed.

"I'll want some decent clothes and a sword," said Campbell.

"You can't reach Diane tonight," Angus objected, his mouth full. "She retires early. She's up at three or four in the morning, to start her horseback rides and cold baths, her beauty treatments. Think of it! A woman of fifty-nine, holding the King's affection against all comers, supremely beautiful, without a mark of age—"

"Court clothes," said Campbell. "Now, at once, before I take Thorn out. They may be looking for a ragged Scot, not for a courtier with a dog."

"Give me five minutes to eat! It won't be dark for an hour."

"Dark enough. And a hat, mind, like these courtiers wear."

"What about your leathern coat?"

"Under my doublet. Get me a fat man's size. Anything at all! And a sword."

Black Angus swore, and sighed, gulped down his wine, and shoved back his chair.

"You're daft! Sheer daft!"

Campbell smiled, but made no response. Angus donned his hat and strode out.

Daft? Perhaps; urgency drove at him, and Campbell felt himself yielding to it. A queer sense of urgency it was. Not for himself. He was a mere pawn in this game. But upon his success or failure hung many lives, the destiny of kingdoms, the triumph of good or evil in this world—more than he could envisage in his mind's eye. And, if this man knew of him and his errand, failure lay close and bitter; this man known to the French as the Captain of the Scots Guard, to the English as Hamilton, to the Scots as the Earl of Arran and next in succession to Scotland's throne! Now it was the game that mattered, not the man, and the game must somehow, somewhere, be won this night or forever lost, and Scotland with it.

SUNSET passed. Shadows crept down upon the valley and town, the lordly chateau stood darkling against the sky with lights glowing from its windows. Black Angus came tramping heavily up the stairs and into the room, a candlestick in one hand, clothes flung over his other arm.

"Malcolm! I've been thinking. About this dog, Thorn. It was a gold plate on his collar, d'ye mind? He must have broken away from someone here, at court, either Scot or English."

"Precisely my own line of thought," broke in Campbell, seizing on the garments. "Well, well, it's a slim hope, Angus. Good garments, and a fair sword. Thanks, greatly."

He was stripping as he spoke, to dress again. Wide hard shoulders, the arm of a swordsman, no great muscles, but rippling silk, steely tough. Into his leathern coat, and jerkin and doublet and long hose, all in a rush of haste.

"What's driving you?" demanded Angus. "You're not going alone?"

"I am that," said Campbell, buckling tight the sword-belt. "If I'm not back in two hours, give me up and get back to your comrades with morning. I'll not incriminate you, should they take me. If I have any luck, I'll send you word of it."

"You daft fool!" growled Angus, staring at him. "You can get nowhere; you can reach no one, of an evening!" "There's always a first time," Campbell put out his hand and wrung that of Angus. "Stout heart! You're a grand comrade. Come, Thorn! To heel—that's right. Well trained, beastie. Farewell, Angus! Until later."

He was out and gone, descending the stairs with Thorn at his heels, a long, hugely graceful shape. And so to the streets, hat cocked over ear, sword pricking up the folds of his cloak, and that drifting silent beast padding at his side. Whither? He knew only vaguely, but turned aright. One could not miss those buildings along the height. All the world pointed thither, even of a dark night; soldiers, guards, courtiers, pages, messengers, friars, horses, carriages. Where the court lay, there was France.

Above the town on a little plateau was the former citadel that had now become a palace. Campbell knew that on the opposite side of the chateau lay the gardens and pleasure walks, and with this objective he followed the circling road, unhurried now.

On this north side of the buildings, however, also lay gardens and terraces, by which Campbell's road passed. Here was the famed Perchoir aux Bretons, the Perch of the Bretons, a terrace where in olden days the Breton nobles were wont to await the pleasure of Queen Anne de Bretagne. These terraces were laid out in paths and hedges and flower-beds, perfumed and blooming under the touch of approaching summer.

Aware of a number of scattered figures on these terraces, Campbell turned into one of the graveled walks. His steps were aimless. He was led by desperation, not by design. To reach his goal by any accustomed channel was impossible unless he revealed his name and errand; this was out of the question. In a day of plot, intrigue, and assassination, high personages were guarded with utmost care by their retinues and servants.

"Oh, it's fantastic; I'm sheer daft, as Angus said," he reflected as he followed the path under the brightening stars. "Thorn, your new master is a fool, an utter fool!" At the low words, Thorn's long muzzle found his hand with a touch of reassurance, and he fondled the sleek head. "Why, beastie, you're close to human! I do believe you understand my words. Be off, then! Look for your old master and bring him to my aid, for any man owning such a dog as you must have a spark of honor and chivalry."

As though he did indeed understand the words, Thorn stiffened suddenly. A low, tense whine escaped him, and he was gone into the darkness.

Campbell walked on, oppressed with a sense of his own folly. In his heart, he knew all this was sheer madness; it was no more than the flickering fancy of a lately fevered brain, urged by desperation.

Best return to town and let Angus seek some way of reaching Diane de Poitiers, he thought gloomily. These masses of royal buildings, glowing with lights, were sinister; here was peril, everywhere was peril. His name was known, men were seeking him—

In upon his thoughts broke the whine of Thorn, a joyous, impetuous, eager whine, followed by a burst of voices in surprise and astonishment. Campbell whistled curtly. Women's voices! The dog came with a rush, bounding over the flower-beds, to leap upon him shoulder-high and whine again with gladness. Then Campbell was aware of three figures in the starlight, coming toward him.

Thorn went leaping back to them. He circled around them and returned to Campbell, who looked at the three women and swore under his breath.

"Now you've done it, Thorn," he muttered. "What's this, eh?"

His words were in English. To his startled surprise, they were echoed by the foremost of the three.

"Just what I was about to ask, monsieur! Who are you and how did you find my dog?"

"Oh! The devil!" ejaculated Campbell. "Your pardon. You speak English, madame?"

He could see little of her except the vague shape of flowing garments.

"Naturally." Her voice was impatient. "Who are you, I say? Of the court, by your attire, but I don't recognize your voice."

CAMPBELL hesitated; his brain raced. Danger, danger! Yet Thorn was pressing against the woman, licking her hand; now the dog came back to him with new eagerness, so that despite the crisis, a laugh escaped him.

"Your dog, say you? Yes, only a woman would let such a dog fall into the hands of barbarous peasants who tried to kill him by torture—"

"By the Rood, this passes endurance!" came the woman's angry voice. "Your name, and at once! Or I'll call the guards if you prefer."

"Wait! For God's sake, madame, wait!" exclaimed Campbell. "Do these women understand English?"

"No; they're two of the Queen's ladies. I'm Anne Haworth, lady of honor to Mary Stuart."

"Haworth!" he exclaimed. "Not Sir John Haworth's daughter? Why, madame, I talked with your father in Perth—why, this is blessed news! I can trust you, I can trust you—"

"That's more than I can say for you," she rejoined tartly. She had come closer, and stood peering at him in the starlight.

Campbell hugged Thorn's head against his thigh. This woman—could he trust her, indeed?

"What is it?" she went on, more gently. "You speak strange words; your air is strange; yet Thorn says you're a friend. That means much."

Campbell came to a decision.

"Madame, I put my life in your hands," he said, almost under his breath. "I'm Malcolm Campbell; I've just arrived from Scotland with an urgent message from the Regent to either Mary Stuart or Madame de Valentinois. I've no means of reaching either one. By ill luck, my mission has become known. I'm being hunted now by the Earl of Arran and his friends. Unless you can help me, I'm a lost man—and Scotland is lost with me, more's the pity!"

"What? Why, this can't be possible!" she exclaimed softly. "Have you anything to vouch for such a story?"

"Thorn will vouch for me," he said; "and I've a letter sewn under my shirt. And if you turn me over to the guards, they'll kill me fast enough."

"Strange!" she replied. "I'm serving the Dame de Valentinois at the moment, since my mistress has not yet arrived; I can take you to her, can pass you through the guards. . . . But—shall I? How can I trust you? It means to stake my own honor and reputation and future upon your word. If you're an assassin and I bring you to her, then I'm lost."

Campbell's heart sank. "Do as you will, madame," he said hopelessly. "I've shot my last shaft, and can do no more."

The two Frenchwomen were whispering and laughing together. From the road near by, where groups were talking or walking, lifted a man's voice that carried clearly to them—evidently one of the Scots Guards.

"Aye, there's gowd i' the purse if ye lay hand on him, and slit his wame before he can talk, says the Captain! They say he's son to old Murdoch Campbell o' Glenlyon, and a master swordsman, so take no chances."

"Why, it's of you he's speaking!" said Anne Haworth.



"Evidently. But I must ask you for your sword and poniard when we gain the apartment of my mistress."

"As you like."

Campbell cared now for nothing. Let them watch him, let them be suspicious, just so that he reached the woman who ruled France! He was suddenly uplifted, carried out of himself, filled with new strength and joy. The impossible was accomplished! But he must send word, he remembered, to Black Angus and set his comrade at rest.

And now, suddenly, they were within the flare of blazing cressets. Guards saluted the well-known Guillaumont. Swaggering courtiers and nobles appeared on the stairs and in the corridors, staring with insolent hauteur at Campbell; then on, amid magnificence of carving, of surroundings, sufficient to stagger one fresh from the less ostentatious palaces of Scotland.

From somewhere drifted music of viols and singers. Shrill French tongues chattered volubly on every hand. Campbell was aware of a handsome, arrogant man aglitter with jewels, talking intimately with a younger but more powerful figure. A few words reached him; they were talking English. He bent to the ear of his guide.

"Who are those two gentlemen we just passed?"

"One, monsieur, is the Captain of the Scots Guards. The younger man is his cousin, Monsieur Hamilton, a gentleman of the Dauphin's entourage."

Campbell chuckled to himself. Under the very eye of Arran, who was seeking high and low for him! Angus would appreciate this. And that other man, that Hamilton—eh? The one Anne Haworth had mentioned.

He began to be very curious about Lady Anne Haworth, as he fondled the ears of the great dark hound stalking along proudly beside him.

Then they were mounting a stairs, passing into a narrow corridor, passing a guard at a farther door and entering a large antechamber. Guillaumont touched him on the arm and asked for his weapons; and Campbell knew he had reached his destination. He was about to be received by the mistress of the King of France.

CHAPTER THREE

DIANE DE POITIERS, now Duchesse de Valentinois, sat over her embroidery, as was her custom of an evening. As she worked, she discussed details of construction with Delorme, the architect of the glorious chateaux she was building. The Bishop of Meaux, her nephew, was chatting with several of her ladies, and in one corner, softly plucking a lute which he held to his ear, being afflicted with deafness, was the poet Ronsard, her fervent admirer.

By birth a great lady, she was yet greater by character and ability. Her private apartment reflected the calm poise, the serenity, that marked her out; it was simple, quietly luxurious, but not ostentatious. Depraved and vicious as was the court, her portion of it remained, like everything she touched, calm and well-ordered.

The circle of Diane de Poitiers held none of those dazzling, licentious personalities given over to depravity. She, who could discuss Plato and Boethius with a philosopher, business administration with a banker and the art of poesy with poets, did not attract decadent minds. Yet she was the mistress of the King and the mother of his child, Diane de France.

To Campbell, waiting inside the door as Guillaumont went forward, it was impossible to believe that this woman was nearly sixty. Her daily regime of horseback rides, cold baths, relaxation and careful diet, a regime so rigorous that few women would have endured its necessity of rising at three in the morning, left her endowed with a youthful freshness that time could not affect. Her complexion was famed for its purity; Campbell would have given her thirty-five years, at most. Above all was her absolute poise, her

"True," said Campbell. "You have but to utter my name, madame, to win Hamilton's favor."

"The devil take Hamilton, and his cousin to boot!" she snapped. "You speak French? Good. Remain with these ladies while I make arrangements." To the women, she said in rapid French: "Mesdames, allow me to present a Scots gentleman, an old friend of mine, the Sieur Malcolm Glenlyon, newly come to court. Tell him of the stars, and advise him of the ways of courtiers, until I return."

Campbell bowed to the two women, who immediately exclaimed upon hearing his excellent French. Anne Haworth moved away, then paused and called Thorn. But Thorn, under Campbell's hand, merely whined slightly.

"Go to her, Thorn!" said Campbell, laughing a little. "And come when I call again."

"He shall not!" floated back her indignant voice; but Campbell paid no heed. The sudden crisis was past; the dice had fallen for him, and in the sharp reaction he found it difficult to concentrate his attention upon the gay speeches of the two French ladies. He was conscious, too, of physical weakness, for the strength had gone out of him.

Yet he forced himself to talk and laugh with the two, to meet their jests with brisk repartee, until one of them asked after a friend, a young noble, serving with the French contingent in Scotland. Campbell, as it chanced, knew the man. This at once made things smoother, and all three were talking amiably when Thorn came leaping out of the darkness to paw at Campbell's chest and lick his cheek. And after him came Anne Haworth and a short, cloaked figure, whom Anne presented in few words.

"Monsieur Glenlyon, I have spoken with my lady, and she has sent her secretary, M. Guillaumont, who will conduct you to her presence at once. She is most anxious to hear your messages from Fontainebleau and our friends in Paris."

This was, of course, for the ears of the others, to whom Campbell bowed and made his excuses. He and Guillaumont started away together; they were at the road, when Thorn came bounding after them, and in spite of calls from his mistress, remained with them as they approached the buildings.

"The animal seems to like you, monsieur," said the secretary dryly. "A good presage, for this is a very curious business. I am taking you by way of the royal apartments, where we shall encounter only the French Guards."

"Madame Haworth must have talked fast," said Campbell, and the other laughed.

quiet serenity which nothing interrupted. She was a woman at peace with earth and heaven.

She heard Guillaumont, looked up at Campbell, and beckoned him. Delorme rose, bowed, and withdrew beyond earshot. Guillaumont, at a gesture, remained. Campbell came forward and bowed, conscious of her blue-gray eyes and masses of chestnut hair, of a quiet voice, of a face that was not beautiful yet was alight with beauty from within.

"Monsieur, you are hurt!" she said, glancing at his bandaged forehead.

"A slight wound, madame; it is nothing," he rejoined. She gestured to the secretary, gave a swift order, extended her hand. Campbell bowed over it.

"Here is a chair. Be seated, monsieur. First, this curious business of your name; I beg you to explain it. You need fear nothing from any ears in this room."

He complied, understanding that she was striving to set him at ease. She smiled wryly over the Scotch names.

"Campbell? Of Glenlyon, is that it? Why, that is almost a French name, Monsieur de Glenlyon! Excellent! And from whom is this message you bring?"

"From Madame Marie de Guise, Regent of Scotland," he rejoined. "It is most urgent, a verbal message— Oh, the devil! Pardon me, madame, pardon me," he said in confusion, for the head of Thorn had shoved forward against him. "I forgot the dog was here."

Diane broke into quick laughter. She reached out and Thorn went to her, and she touched his head. Then she saw his scars and her eyes widened.

"But he has been hurt! Like you, monsieur!"

"Yes, madame. But my message is more important."

"Perhaps, perhaps not," she said coolly. "A verbal message, you say?"

"Yes, madame. I have a letter from Madame Marie, sewn within my doublet, which will guarantee all that I say." Campbell was confused again. "I can't get it out here. I'll have to take off the doublet to reach it." He broke off, coloring.

"It can wait." Diane smiled a little as she eyed him. "That my good cousin Marie should send you, is guarantee enough for the moment. First, the message."

Campbell met her quiet smile, and felt her composure stealing out upon him. His heart ceased to hammer. Words came to him, words that shocked the listening secretary into pallid incredulity, yet had no effect upon the woman before him.

"Madame, this is the message: Argyll, Stewart and other great lords of Scotland have formed a convention to seize the kingdom and depose Mary Stuart, using religious troubles as a pretext. Much of the kingdom is already in their hands. They are backed by English money and help."

"But then who would be their king?" broke in Diane swiftly.

"The Earl of Arran, head of the Hamilton clan, who is next in line to the succession."

"He? But he is Captain of our Scots Guard here!"

"Precisely, madame. He is to leave France at once and go to England. It has been arranged that he is to marry the new queen there, Elizabeth; the realms of Scotland and England will be united under their rule."

Into the cheeks of Diane, which had the fresh and lovely smoothness of a girl, mounted a slight color, her only sign of agitation. She laid aside her embroidery, her gaze on that of Campbell.

"Monsieur, this plan could not have been so definitely arranged without French aid and support. We have an army in Scotland now, upholding the Regent."

"Yes, madame. The French commanders take their orders from M. de Montmorency, the High Constable of France. At his orders they will abandon the cause of the Regent and of Mary Stuart. Her Highness the Regent has proof that he has given such orders and is allied in this affair with the Earl of Arran and with English agents."

Guillaumont made a slight noise with his tongue, an involuntary cluck of sheer horror. Diane relaxed and nodded thoughtfully. For a moment there was silence. . . .

From the time the child Mary Stuart had come to France, Diane de Poitiers had acted to her in the place of a mother, arranging every detail of her education and life. She had done the same to the girl Catherine de Medici, the child-wife of Henri II, watching over them with a wise and careful prudence, as she watched over the affairs of the kingdom and of her lover who ruled it.

"THIS," she broke the silence gently, "would not be the first time Montmorency has betrayed his trust and his king, nor will it be the last. Well, monsieur? Does this conclude the message?"

"Not quite, madame," Campbell paused. "Her Highness uttered these words: If you give this news to my daughter, tell her to consult Madame de Valentinois regarding it. If you cannot reach her, give the message to Madame de Valentinois and say that she has my complete trust and confidence, and must take what action seems best to her."

"What action seems best?" murmured Diane. "What action, indeed, will prevent the union of England and Scotland against France? This Elizabeth of England plans well. She is very shrewd. She knows that we face civil war, that we must not antagonize Montmorency, the Constable, that we have just signed a treaty of peace with Spain and must preserve this peace if we are to restore order in France."

"If the King knew of this matter, madame—" suggested the secretary.

Her delicate brows lifted slightly. "If he knew? He would immediately burn with a sense of justice and become the champion of our little Marie Stuart. But France needs peace." She looked at Campbell, with that enchanting smile which melted men's hearts. "M. de Glenlyon, this noble dog possesses a dignity and calm strength which I find in few men. While I speak with him, will you have the kindness to retire with M. Guillaumont and obtain for me the letter which you have mentioned?"

She extended her hand to Thorn, who came to her, crouched submissively, and swept the room with eyes of proud disdain as she caressed him. Campbell rose, bowed, and left the room with Guillaumont, who led him into a small antechamber.

"One would swear, monsieur," said the secretary, "that this dog possesses the soul of a man! Here is your poniard. Permit me to assist you."

Once out of his hot leather jerkin, which he discarded altogether, Campbell cut the stitches that held the folded vellum. Reclad, the letter in hand, he accompanied Guillaumont back to the private room; a guard at the door gestured significantly to the secretary.

"Le Balafré's in there. I think he was summoned."

With a nod, Guillaumont led Campbell in.

Short as was the elapsed time, changes had taken place in the room. The Bishop was gone, Ronsard was gone; but the number of ladies had increased. Diane sat with one hand on the head of Thorn, and before her was standing a commanding figure glinting with jewels and orders, a tall, soldierly man whose beard could not conceal the scar that gave him his nickname of Balafré.

This was François, Duc de Guise, head of that great house which disputed with Valois its right to the throne of France, friend and relative and devoted adherent of Diane de Poitiers.

Diane beckoned to the two, and held out her hand for the letter, which Campbell presented on one knee.

"M. de Guise," she said, "allow me to present M. de Glenlyon, a noble gentleman of Scotland who has just brought me this letter from your sister Marie." As she spoke, as Guise turned to Campbell and bowed slightly, as Campbell bowed in return, she was scanning the lines of writing on the vellum. She continued swiftly:

"Monsieur, your sister is in danger. We must have instant action, without recourse to the Constable or others; this is a matter of family peril, which we both hold close to heart. I wish you to take secret measures to collect ships at the northern ports and to gather a large force of men; it must be done swiftly and quietly."

Guise looked astonished, fingered the great scar on his cheek, and nodded.

"Very well; but what authority pays?"

"Mine," said Diane promptly. "I will guarantee all sums needed. Further, appoint at once only men you can trust, new commanders in Scotland."

"Oh!" said Guise. "By whom, madame? By the Constable?"

"By your brother the Duc d'Aumale, second in command of French forces."

"Oh!" said Guise again, a twinkle in his eye. Diane's daughter was married to Aumale. "Upon my word, madame, my sister must have sent you disturbing intelligence! M. de Montmorency will be most vexed to hear it."

"He will hear it too late," Diane replied calmly, "for his own purposes."

"Excellent!" said Guise, who had small love for the Constable. "And what further?"

"Secrecy, and speed."

Comprehending there was no more to be said, Guise bowed again over her hand, inclined his head slightly to Campbell, and departed. Diane fastened her calm regard on Guillaumont.

"Monsieur, the English ambassador, M. Throckmorton, is involved in this affair, as is the Constable. Now arises the question of the Earl of Arran, Captain of the Scots Guards, whom Queen Elizabeth seems to fancy as a husband."

The secretary shrugged. "Madame, he is in France, in the service of France; and France has prisons."

Diane turned to Campbell.

"Monsieur, will you be in any further danger, now that your message has been given?"

"I think not, madame; it was desired to stop the message, not the man."

"Hm! Guillaumont, you know that man Chaudiere, of His Majesty's suite—the same whom we were warned was a spy and agent of the English ambassador?"

"Yes, madame."

"Go find him now, on the instant. Drink with him. Confide to him that a messenger has arrived from Scotland, with word of a plot. Drop a strong hint that tomorrow the Captain of the Scots Guards is to be arrested."

Alarm seized the secretary. "But, madame! You know what will happen. This man Arran will be warned, will take to flight!"

"Precisely. The English will aid him to leave the country. Prepare a letter, which I will sign tonight, to the lieutenant-general of the kingdom, asking him to make certain that Arran is permitted to leave France; but it must be arranged that his flight takes place via Switzerland. He must be a fugitive, you understand? He must believe himself in danger of his life. You can manage this."

"Certainly, madame," said the secretary, looking more and more astonished.

A laugh escaped Diane.

"Let him ruin himself. Let him escape by devious ways. Let it be understood that the whole plot is known. This Elizabeth is a proud woman; she will be disgusted with such a man. The marriage will fall through. Meantime, troops and supplies will reach Marie of Guise. The whole bottom will drop out of this fine plot; the affair is finished."

Guillaumont bowed and departed. Diane regarded Campbell reflectively.

"You see, monsieur, how simple it is to let rascals defeat themselves! We are relieved of a traitor, the intrigue that threatens war is turned into a jest, the Regent of Scotland is reinforced, the English are checkmated. And all because of a message delivered."

Campbell looked at Thorn, who yawned vastly.

"All because of a dog, madame."

"Oh! Tell me about it, and about that wound you bear!"

Campbell complied. He was aware that the group of ladies had drawn closer, at a sign from Diane; he glanced at them as he spoke, telling what had happened and how Thorn had been found.

"So you would not recognize this Lady Anne again?" inquired Diane.

"Unfortunately not, madame; it was dark outside, and I could see little of her."

"Then let me present you. Ladies, this is M. de Glenlyon. Come, Lady Anne, your quick wit has served us well this night! Your cheek, child, your cheek!"

Campbell found himself bowing to a young woman all red and white, whose laughing eyes dwelt upon him amusedly. He touched her cheek with his lips, as the custom was, then swung around as Diane addressed him.

"Monsieur, what is your desire? You speak French too well not to be of great service here, if you desire to remain in France."

"Why, madame, I scarcely know," said Campbell. "I must let my friend Angus know that all is well with me—"

"See that word is sent to the man Angus, Lady Anne," said Diane quickly. "Where is he, monsieur?"

Campbell gave the location of the house in town, and Lady Anne left the room. Then Diane continued:

"You have plans, ambitions, hopes. What are they?"

"Only to serve my queen, madame."

"And your queen is the Dauphine of France. Very good, monsieur! Then you shall remain here, for the present. . . Ah! What is that?"

A chamberlain had entered. He came forward, bowing, with word that the King desired to know if Madame de Valentinois would receive him. There was an instant flurry among the ladies, but Diane assented calmly:

"By all means. We shall be greatly honored, and I desire to present this gentleman to His Majesty. Remain, monsieur."

To Campbell it was unreal, fantastic, incredible. This tall, stalwart man with the fringe of black beard, the regal bearing, the magnificent garments and jewels—the King of France! Diane curtsied low. The King raised her, kissed her hands, laughed, and turned to Campbell, who went to one knee and kissed the extended hand. For an instant he met the profound, bold black eyes, noted the peculiar contraction of the left eyebrow, heard the voice of Diane as from far away, and realized that Henri was speaking to him.

"Indeed, monsieur! It gives me great pleasure to welcome you. Any gentleman of Scotland is an honor to our surroundings. What's that, Diane? Of course, of course; there's the very spot for him! Equerry to our little Marie; when she arrives, he'll greet her in her own tongue as a pleasant surprise, eh? It will carry only five thousand crowns a year, but we may arrange better in time. Here, monsieur; do me the honor of accepting this token of our favor as a pledge against the future. And, Diane, let one of your ladies take him at once to St. André, who will arrange for lodgings and all else, including an advance upon his salary. My felicitations, M. de Glenlyon!"

It was all a dream, beyond credence.

He had slunk into this room a hunted man, his life at stake, his future all awry. He walked out with Anne Haworth holding his hand and laughing at his confused air, the King's diamond on his finger, Thorn stalking grandly between them.

Equerry to the Dauphine, a post at court, the royal favor assured, all danger swept away in an instant—why, it was a regular sunburst of glory!

Then, outside in the antechamber where a number of the King's gentlemen chattered and stared at them, Anne Haworth halted and looked hard at him.

"Glenlyon, eh?" she said. "Not as good a name as Campbell, but more fortunate. And there's one thing to settle. Do you still lay claim to Thorn?"

Campbell met her half-laughing eyes. Fine brave eyes, ablaze with an eager light; dark eyes, a merry open countenance but one filled with character.

"Did you send word to Angus?" he asked.

"I did. And Thorn belongs to me, do you understand?" The dark eyes were no longer laughing. They were intent and passionate. "To me!"

"Not a bit of it," said Campbell. "Is he a crawling serf to be the mere property of any person? Rather, a friend. Let him choose. Go to the door, yonder, and call him."

Impetuously, she obeyed, crossing to the doorway and swinging around with a swish of skirts. She extended her hand and called the dog.

"Down, Thorn!" said Campbell quietly.

Thorn looked at her, his curved tail moving. He looked up at Campbell, looked again at the girl who called him, then sank down, head on paws, at Campbell's feet.

"You see? He has decided for himself."

A touch of anger lifted in her cheeks.

"Why, I wonder, did the Regent pick you for such a mission?"

"Because your father, who is the Regent's steward, recommended me," said Campbell. "And because an unknown gentleman might get through, where some great lord could not."

"And now you'd steal my dog! That's what one might expect of a Campbell of Argyll. They're all cattle rieviers in the west country."

"No," he said, lightly amused. "A Campbell of Glenlyon. That's title enough, my lass, if it's a title you're looking for."

"My lass, indeed! You presume on short acquaintance. Lady Anne to you, Campbell lout! Mind your manners, now you're at court."

"Aye, your father said you had a harsh tongue," he rejoined easily. "'A harsh tongue like her mother, and like her a heart of gold and the ambition of an angel! And a tidy hand with the broom or the cookstove.' I doubt if you'd handle the cookpot well, however; you seem a fine lady indeed, though I owe you great thanks for serving me so well this night."

"Not you, but our queen!" she said stubbornly, as though fighting to keep up her hot impetuous temper. "You're harsh enough of tongue your own self, it seems; the touch of the King's hand has set you up mightily. The man who asked help in the cold night sang a different tune."

"Did he, indeed? God forbid!" said Campbell. "I'm sorry for that, Anne Haworth. You have the bloom of Scots mists in your cheeks, and your father's pride in your eye; a bonny lass, and no harm in the word either. Not cut to a standard pattern, like these French ladies who are all alike; but hot porridge one minute, cold porridge the next. . . . Why, you're a woman in a thousand! Hasty word, and quick smile afterward, like sunlight and shadow on heather."

He smiled at her, but his words died and his smile failed. Weakness, a sudden let-down from crisis, sent everything swimming before him. He saw her as through a mist.

"What is it?" Her face changed. "Why, you're pale!"

"Nothing, nothing, mere weariness," he said. His head cleared. "Come along, let's get the job over with and a lodging found. Who's this St. André we're seeking?"

"The Master of the Household, and a great noble," she rejoined, then came to him and put out her hand to his arm. "Please, Malcolm Campbell! It's true I've a quick tongue, and spoke you harsh; but the thought of you keeping my dog was a cruel one and goaded me. You'll not take Thorn from me? I brought him from Scotland three years ago. My father raised him." She was all friendly now, her dark eyes alight with pleading. The soft warmth and beauty of her went to Campbell's heart.

"You'll not take him? He's known you but a little while, and me all his days!"

"No, I will not," said Campbell gravely, striving to overcome the weakness that gnawed at him. "I'll not lift a hand to take him from you." He paused an instant, then went on: "But there's more to the story than you know. We've been stung and whipped by the same lash, and that's a strong bond. Also, he owes me his life and knows it. So if he follows me, I'll not say him nay. To you he's but a dog, as I'm only a Campbell lout. To me he's a friend and comrade whom I need sorely. So like that or like it not, as you please."

He stooped to touch the dog's head, felt the quick tongue lick his hand, and scarcely remembered what followed; nothing mattered. He had won his race with death, and was aware only of the consuming weariness upon him.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE flight of the Earl of Arran was only a two days' wonder at court, though it was destined to be far more than this in the annals of Europe. If the chief of the Hamiltons were gone, however, others of the name remained. More than once, Campbell caught a flash of the scarlet-and-blue Hamilton tartan among the stalwart figures of the Guards, like an evil omen.

Those three days before Mary Stuart and the Dauphin arrived set Campbell firmly on his feet again. His wound had healed as by magic, good food and rest worked wonders. Thorn stuck by him like a shadow, but of Anne Haworth he had seen no more except at a distance.

On the third morning, when word of Arran's sudden flight was no longer a secret, Campbell was watching the grooms exercise certain horses belonging to Mary Stuart, as part of his new duties, when he saw Black Angus and two other resplendent figures in Highland dress approaching. He himself, as befitting his position, had acquired a quietly rich court dress of blue Genoa velvet, but the Guards retained all the panoply of the Scots regime.

Campbell was getting fairly well shaken down. Most of the French nobles and officials treated him with indifference; a few with hostility; still other few with fawning subservience, since the King had twice stopped and spoken briefly with him.

"Come away, Malcolm," sang out Angus, drawing near. "Here's two of the lads off duty to have a word with you, so call their names and prove if ye be a Scot or no."

Campbell glanced at the kilts and bonnets, and held out his hand, smiling.

"By the badge of broom and the blue-green kilt, you're both Forbes of Craigievar," he said, meeting warm grips. "My father's often spoken of a Long John Forbes who raided the border with him in the old days."

"Myself, at your service," said one of the two, a towering, lanky man with reddish-gray beard. "And this is my cousin Alec, the best man in the company with crossbow or long bow; and it's heart's pleasure to meet with your father's son. Come for a walk up the glen, man, and we'll have a bit talk before noon meat."

On guard duty, the Scots Archers carried no bows or targets; the kilt and plaid were one, in that period, to be used as a cloak by day and a blanket by night, while the dirk and belted claymore were weapons enough. A glance at the serious face of Angus told Campbell that something was afoot; dismissing the grooms, he joined the three and walked with them among the trees behind the stables and outbuildings, while Thorn nosed about the undergrowth.

"So you're a fine gentleman of the court, Malcolm of Glenlyon," spoke up Alec Forbes, who was red as his long cousin, but beardless.

"Aye, he is," said Angus. "And looks better than of late, with his beard shaved clean and his braw new clothes and bit of a sword."



"Oh!" said Campbell, comprehending. "A warning, eh? . . . I thank you."

"He'll do, if he can use a sword," observed Long John critically. "Though he lacks in years. Twenty-four, at a guess. At that age, I had grown a beard that'd turn a sword-cut."

Campbell laughed. "And still would, by its looks," he said, eying that flaming though somewhat grizzled beard. "Twenty-six, to be exact. I don't suppose you're taking me here among the trees to discuss the weather?"

"Small chance," grunted Angus, and glanced around. "Here's a good spot. Alec, keep an eye out while we talk!"

"Better, let Thorn do it," intervened Campbell. Evidently there was some need of privacy. "Thorn! On guard, comrade! Guard!"

Thorn wagged assent and stole off among the trees.

"Losh! He's all but human!" said Long John admiringly. "Well, well, let's to it. Angus, broach the matter and don't be long-winded."

"My wind's my own," said Black Angus composedly. "Malcolm, it's well said that red tartans aye keep company in the devil's train! In the company are Ramsays and

Erskines and Scotts, such Lowland gentry as you'd expect to be consorting with Hamiltons—

"Lowland yourself," broke in Alec Forbes. "Since when did the Douglasses ride north of the Clyde? But it's red tartans and no mistake. Go on with it."

"The point being," pursued Angus, pawing his beard, "that Mounseer Glenlyon had best watch himself of nights and turn a soft word to any evil wind that blows; for if he gets into a quarrel, he's ended. There's Silken James Hamilton, a fine gentleman of the court, and cousin of Arran. Silken James is a braw lad himself and has French steel at his beck, and Scots dirks to help."

"Oh!" said Campbell, comprehending. "A warning, eh?"

"Just that, aye," Long John nodded. "Many a Scot has become more French than the French, comrade; but not us. A plague on all Frenchmen, say I!"

"Silken James, eh? So that's your name for him," said Campbell reflectively. "I thank you for the warning—"

"Oh, it's not ended; it's just begun," intervened Angus. "Long John was on guard last night, and speaks French

poorly but kens it well, and bends his ear to the keyhole when the chance comes—"

"You lie, you black heathen!" said Long John placidly. "They were in liquor and talking loud, that's the truth."

"Who?" demanded Campbell.

"Hamilton, and Montmorency, brother of the Constable, and Baron de Castelnau, and the Prince de Condé, nephew of the Constable, and Charles de Gondi, Master of the Queen's Wardrobe."

"That damned Italian?" exclaimed Alec Forbes. "Why, it was a conspiracy, no less!"

Long John nodded. "Exactly, cousin. A conspiracy. Backed by the Queen's friends. Does this Mounseer Glenlyon know anything about our Italian lady of the beautiful leg and fine hand and devil's heart?"

"Get on with your yarn," snapped Alec Forbes, keeping a sharp lookout upon the trees around. "He doesn't need to know. We serve Mary Stuart, and to hell with the Italians and Frenchmen to boot! That's all any honest Scot needs to know."

"You're long in the wind as Macleod's piper yourself," grumbled Long John. "Well, here's the way of it. Mary Stuart and the Dauphin reach here tomorrow. Malcolm Campbell, or Mounseer Glenlyon, is to be drawn into a duel and stabbed in the back, at the first chance. Silken James got that as his price for saying aye to the others, joining the Queen's party and lending his aid."

"In what?" demanded Angus impatiently. "What's the point of it all?"

"Well, I don't know." Long John fingered his red beard. "I didn't get it clearly. It's something about the King's helmet, and an astrologer's prediction. You know, the Italian woman believes in these cursed astrologers and has one herself. Oh, yes! There was one thing more—"

The other two broke into imprecations.

"The saints preserve us from thick wits!" growled Black Angus. "The King's helmet, you say; an astrologer's prediction, quoth'a, his wits all run to length! Where's the sense in this fools' talk?"

"Wait," exclaimed Alec Forbes, clapping his cousin violently on the back as though to dislodge a choked thought. "Out with it, John! Notch shaft and let fly! What's the one thing more?"

Long John, with knotted brows, tugged at his beard. "Blessed angels, help me!" said Black Angus, rolling his eyes to heaven. He leaned forward, caught Long John by the shoulders, and shook him violently. "Man! Wake up! You know well that the Italian woman hates the Guises. You know that Le Balafré, the Duc de Guise, is the support and stay of Mary Stuart and of her Scots inheritance; you know that Mary of Guise is Regent of Scotland and sister of Le Balafré! Speak, for the love of God! Think! Remember! What devil's work are these French and Italians brewing?"

"Let go. I have it, I remember now!" exclaimed Long John. "It was about killing Le Balafré."

A GASP shook Alec Forbes. Black Angus, jaw fallen, stared from widening eyes.

"And you remember, all of a sudden!" he cried in gusty anger. "I suppose if they talked of murdering the King, you'd forget that, too! Well, let's have it."

"It wasn't much, really," Long John said apologetically. "The court moves to St. Germain and Paris in June, to celebrate the double marriage of the King's sister to the Duke of Savoy and of his daughter to Philip of Spain—"

"We know that, dolt," interrupted Angus. "Everyone knows that. And this is the first week in May. And the sun is shining. Speak, or by the nails of God I'll choke it out of you! What about Guise?"

"Oh! He's going to Paris in a few days, and to Lorraine. Something about his estates and a sick man, his steward. It's not clear to me at all," rumbled Long John, desperately scowling. "Anyhow, Hamilton goes with him and few or

none of his own suite, and an escort of the Scots Guards is given him. . . . Yes, that's right. A special honor. Given him by Mary Stuart, that's it. Hamilton said he would arrange it. And when they get to Orléans, Le Balafré is dead!" Long John raised his head and gazed around triumphantly. "That's it, upon my word! That's exactly it! Everybody was very happy about it, and Hamilton is to be made a marquis or duke or something."

Campbell listened with more of curiosity than any other emotion. The assassination of a French nobleman, however great, was nothing to stir his heart. Such matters were the order of the day; in Scotland they were of common occurrence, and by no means rare here. Henri of France had come to the throne because his elder brother was poisoned. But, when he saw the effect upon Angus and Alec Forbes, when he saw how they were white and shaken to the depths, he comprehended that there was something more here than he knew.

"WHAT is it?" he asked. "What does it mean? Do we care if these depraved and degenerate French nobles murder one another?"

Alec Forbes choked at this, but Black Angus turned patiently to him and started to speak, then broke off.

"No," he said sharply. "We've done enough talking here, comrades. Scatter! Take Thorn and walk on, Malcolm, and circle back. We must show up for mess or they'll suspect. Meet me tonight after the change of guard, in the gardens on the north side, by the new tower. And leave Thorn at home. For the love of God, don't fail to come!" he added urgently. "You don't know what—"

He broke off, at a sign of caution and alarm from Alec, who pointed. All turned. Thorn had come into sight, head erect, ears pricked up; he uttered a low growling whine, then burst into a leap and was gone.

"Ware!" exclaimed Angus, putting hand to sword. "Whoever it is, no friend!"

"No friend?" exclaimed a ringing, laughing voice. "After the change of guard tonight, you say? So, Black Angus of Kilsplindie! And Long John and Alec Forbes—oh! And our fine new equerry, Monsieur de Glenlyon, with the King's baubee glittering on his finger!"

She rose up and stood looking merrily upon them, Thorn gamboling about her knees.

"What's it all about?" Anne Haworth looked from one to the other. "A fine lot of conspirators you are! So you trusted Thorn to keep watch, eh? You sorry rogues! What's the secret? Speak up, Long John Forbes! You know me well; speak up!"

"Why, Lady Anne, about—about Le Balafré," gulped Long John, before Angus hit him in the midriff with heavy hand and doubled him up.

Rising, Angus glowered at the girl.

"Naught for your ears, Anne Haworth," he said gravely. Her laughter died. "That may be, Angus; but you know me, and I know you," she said steadily. Her gaze touched on Campbell, lightly. "You're true men, you and Alec and Long John, and I'd not see three good men make fools of themselves before Frenchmen. I don't know what it's about, but you should know that Anne Haworth is as good a Scot as any of you—"

"It's no secret for you, mistress," began Alec stubbornly, but Campbell laughed softly and took the word from him.

"Why not, comrades? This lass is one of us. She knows the court and its ways better than all of us put together. There's good sense to what she says. Her wits may well save us from somehow making fools of ourselves. If she can keep the rendezvous with us tonight, Angus, I say let her do it!"

"Thanks, Glenlyon," said the girl quietly.

Black Angus exchanged a look with Alec, and after a moment lost his frown and nodded grudgingly.

"All right; ye say well there's sense to it, Malcolm. But mind, no word to her now!"

"Done with you," assented Campbell. "And best split up here, as you said. Lady Anne, may I escort you back to the chateau?"

"I'll be glad," she replied, and gave Black Angus a long, steady look. "All Scots together, Angus, those of us that are true folk! You can depend on that."

"Aye, we ken it well," spoke out Alec Forbes. "But there's sore work ahead for all honest men."

His words, with their Highland burr, echoed in Campbell's mind as he walked away with Anne Haworth. "Sair wark, sair wark ahead!" That meant the whirl of goose-feathered yards and the ring of steel, stout hearts girt in by treachery and the ominous pooling of crimson blood in the sunlight. . . . The thought passed, as Anne Haworth spoke.

"Well, Glenlyon? I suppose there's no use asking you now?"

A smile twisted his wide, strong lips as he silently shook his head. The wound disfigured those shaven features, but it was a strong face, high-boned, the gray eyes set wide and holding a curious feel of inner power and assurance. Her gaze dwelt upon him as they walked back among the trees, with Thorn padding at heel.

"There's something about you," she said, "that reminds me faintly of two people. Of Lady Diane, and of a man I met. Not that you look like them. Just something about you that gives the same impression of quiet and depth and strength."

"Indeed?" His eyes warmed upon her. "Who was the man?"

"A physician, a famous astrologer by all accounts, whom the King summoned here. They say he comes from a family of converted Jews, in the south. His name is Nostradamus, or Notre-dame in French."

"Oh!" Campbell stopped short. "Why, that was the man I told you about! The physician who came to the tavern! He's here in Blois, or his assistant is. I didn't see him, for my eyes were bandaged. Angus says he was a fey man, with second sight, a man of wonder."

"He's the greatest physician in France today," said Anne, "but he has many bitter enemies. He doesn't hesitate to speak his mind about quacks and impostors; his profession is filled with them. I've heard it said that he'll be burned at the stake for sorcery one of these days. Well, here we are back again! And—look, look!" Her voice leaped swiftly. "She's coming back from her ride—the Queen!"

"The world's full of queens, it seems," said Campbell lightly, as he watched the file of superb horses clattering into the courtyard ahead of them. "Which one?"

"There's only one Queen of France, stupid! The Italian woman."

She went on speaking softly, eagerly, her voice interpreting the scene to his eyes, as grooms sallied forth to take the horses and guards formed up and saluted.

The central figure was that of Catherine, riding the side-saddle which had been invented to display her one attribute of beauty, a superb leg and ankle. Somber despite her show of jewels and gold, a dumpy and inelegant woman, her features held a darkly severe force of character that was singularly unpleasant but impressive.

There were not many in her suite; a number of Italians who had come with her from Florence, the Gondi brethren, Strozzi, officials of her household, guards, equerries, half a dozen of her ladies. She was, as she had been these many years, a nonentity, a person of no importance in France; merely the mother of the King's children, despised as the daughter of merchants and unloved by any. All her life she had been totally eclipsed by Diane de Poitiers. Unloved, powerless, despised—and yet the Queen of France. . . . The hand of Anne Haworth tightened on Campbell's arm.

"Heaven help France if she should ever get power!" said the girl under her breath. "She's astute, crafty, vengeful. The pride and arrogance of the Guises have held her crushed; she has fed on hatred for years. She hates them

with all her heart. She hates Diane, yet fears her terribly, as some evil thing fears and hates the sunlight! She hates our Mary Stuart, as the unloved thing hates that which all men love. But she has ability, she has. . . . Look—do you see that tall man with the gray beard, in the black robe? That's her astrologer, Ruggieri. He's her physician and star-gazer; they say he knows all the future. She moves in the dark places, like an otter under water."

"Faith, you seem to detest and fear her!" said Campbell. He felt a shiver in her hand.

"Who doesn't? The Dauphin is a boy of sixteen; Mary Stuart is only seventeen. Mere children! But while the King stands between, Lady Diane is safe from her. While the Guises keep their vast power, Mary Stuart is safe from her."

"Why, you speak as though she were actually to be feared by them!" said Campbell in astonishment. The girl looked into his face, her eyes wide and set.

"And why not? It was a Florentine who poisoned the Dauphin and made Henri heir to the throne! They had never expected Catherine to be a queen."

Campbell frowned slightly. He remembered those broken phrases Long John Forbes had uttered—"something about the King's helmet, and an astrologer's prediction." The words made no sense for him, yet he, too, felt a slight shiver creep through him, as though it came to him from the girl on his arm. Then she spoke, with abrupt change of subject.

"Tell me, Glenlyon; what's back of you, what's ahead? What has your life been?"

"Oh, schooling and war," he responded. "I've ridden the Border, raided and harried, learned my letters and a bit of Latin, learned sword and bow and lance."

"But the future? Where are you heading? What's your ambition?" she persisted. They had come to the courtyard and were halted there.

"To do my best," he said quietly. "Your father once said to me that in these days of blood and fire a Scots gentleman should aim at only three things in life: unsullied honor, courage in the darkest hour, and sword kept at razor-edge. Damned few men I know are able to claim all three, at least in Scotland!"

Her hand squeezed his arm and then fell away.

"Fewer still, I think, in France," she said. "I've changed my mind about you, Glenlyon. I think that I may like you after all. I'll see you tonight at the tower in the north gardens. And—you may keep Thorn, since he seems to want you, with my blessing!"

She was gone, with her gay laugh. But Campbell comprehended that those words had not come easily to her lips, and his heart warmed to her.

CHAPTER FIVE

CAMPBELL could well understand that if Black Angus had secrets to discuss, it would be the height of folly to discuss them within the walls of the royal chateau; they could be only for the open air, where the stars alone might overhear.

An hour after darkness, when the guard had been changed for the night, he left Thorn in his room and made his way to the south gardens. There was no longer any overt danger for him; the search for Malcolm Campbell had ended with the flight of Arran. Although many of the Scots Guards eyed him with surly glances, he was safe from them . . . thus far. Not for long, to judge by Long John's warning.

He was thinking of this as he paced out along the paths toward the new tower, which with scattered piles of stones marked the unfinished building operations of the late King François. Yes, the vengeance of the Hamiltons would seek hard to find him out, and soon. There were Scots to help, also.

Many of the Guard had never seen Scotland, but had come from families settled in France since the day of Louis XI or earlier. Others had come across ten years ago with the child queen, Mary Stuart—men like Long John or Angus. These stuck together tightly, distrusting and damning Frenchified Scots and Italians and French alike, and serving their queen alone.

"Too bad there aren't more like them," reflected Campbell. "Too many Scots give allegiance to their clan or its head, and none to their queen! A traitor like Arran is still chief of the Hamiltons and well served by them. And this Silken James, this Hamilton who's at court here, may well command the dirks and bows of many an archer of the guard and many a Frenchman besides. Murder's their game, a dozen swords against one and no quarter given!"

He had seen nobody in the darkness; but now came a stir, and a brawny shape uprose in the starlight, almost beside him. It was Angus, who had been waiting with his tartan wrapped about his shoulders, and who now spread the thick wool over a block of stone.

"Sit ye, Malcolm of the scarred brow! I've put an order in with the Guards' outfitter for a six-yard tartan of the Campbell greens and yellow. It'll come from the Paris stocks in a few days, and may serve at need. I had news of our physician this night."

"Who? Notredame?"

"The same. He's gone to Orléans to attend some great folk there. . . . Ah! Here's the lass."

From the pleasure-walk that overlooked the dark Loire, Anne Haworth came tripping nimbly, wrapped from head to heels in a dark mantle. She welcomed a seat on the big plaid tartan, and chuckled softly.

"Pleasant news for you, Angus Dhu! They say that Silken James, although he's a Hamilton, is to have temporary command of the Guards, until some Scots noble of sufficient rank is given the post."

Angus smothered an oath, then broke forth.

"There's the proof, Malcolm, d'ye mind? Captain of the Guard! And he's the one to go with Le Balafré! Be sure, he'll take along only those of his own choosing."

"Guise, again? What about the good Duke François, the best soldier in France?" demanded Anne quickly. "What's this secret?"

Black Angus plumped it out, just as Long John Forbes had recounted it, names and all. To it, he added the warning given Campbell, and wound up all out of breath, while Anne sat, chin in hand, and said no word.

"Well, what do you think of it?" asked Campbell.

She turned to him.

"That you're a doomed man unless you can restrain your temper."

"That's to be seen. I mean the other thing, about Guise? He's Mary Stuart's uncle, of course, but I don't see why Angus and Alec Forbes should be so worked up about it."

"Then it's high time you did," growled Black Angus. "First, this scarred Guise is the best man and the greatest prince in France, second only to the King. Also, he has a claim to the throne himself, and a good one. He's the idol of the army and the people love him for a blunt, brave fellow. In fact, he's one of the few Frenchmen I'd take off my bonnet to with a good grace."

"True, he has the eyes of a soldier," said Campbell.

"A man's man. Well, he's to be murdered! Why? Because the Italian wench hates and fears him. Because he stands in the way of all the rascals. Because he supports Lady Diane, and our Mary Stuart. Because he's a grand man who won't sully his honor or stain his hands with filth. And who's to murder him?"

"Silken James, apparently," Campbell replied. "And capable of the job, to judge by the little I've seen of him."

"You miss the point!" fumed Black Angus. "These rascals wangle it to have Mary Stuart give him an escort

of her archers under Silken James himself, to Orléans. Guise gets there a dead man. What then? The fury of the army, of the Guise faction, of all the French people, is turned on Mary Stuart. They'll say she murdered him, her own uncle! That's the end of her and of the Scots Guards as well, d'ye mind? Perhaps of Lady Diane too; they'll drag her into the mess somehow. You never saw such a country for lies and liars, Malcolm!"

"Scotland doesn't do so badly at that, herself, these days," said Campbell. "But I see your point, yes. And behind it all, behind these men who plot—"

"The Italian woman, of course."

"Say you so, Lady Anne?" Campbell turned to the girl. "Now you've heard all. What think you of it?"

"Oh, there's nothing extraordinary about it, except that this time they fly at high game," she said reflectively. "Assassinations aren't unusual. And if the power of the Guises were broken, Catherine would profit vastly; at the same time, it'd be a shrewd stroke at little Mary Stuart. Poor child! Because she has brains, and pride, and will some day be Queen of France as well as of Scotland, Catherine hates her like a viper."

"Then you think Long John heard aright?"

"Of course he did. But are we to make fools of ourselves? Careful, Black Angus! What's in your mind to do about it?"

"Warn Mary Stuart. Also Le Balafré."

"Pish! His life is threatened always; he'd pay no heed to warnings, nor credit them. And she, after all, is only a girl, with little power. What could she do?"

"All right, then," said Angus sullenly. "Carry the word to Lady Diane."

ANNE reflected on this. "No," she said at length. "That would save Guise; but those others would slide out uninjured. Better to shatter the sword in Catherine's hand, than merely to ward off the blow. This is a matter for Scots to handle for their queen. At least, that's my rede. Those rascally Scots who serve Hamilton could well be spared."

"Well said," approved Campbell. "Let Scot kill Scot, eh? All hands suited. They're doing that in Scotland every day."

"None of your sarcasm, thanks," she riposted. "By the way, I might advise you that Thorn has been trained to protect his master's back. If you have need, give him the word: 'Back to back, Thorn!' He'll not fail you."

"Anyone in France has need of such protection," chimed in Angus gruffly. "Well, lass, what's your mind about this matter?"

"Let the matter come to a head," she said. "If you see it coming, if this journey of Le Balafré's really takes place, with a Scots escort, then you'll know what to expect and can act accordingly. I'd say, give the only warning with a yard-long shaft and the edge of your sword! It's taking a big risk, of course, but it's a game for Scots archers, not for highway police of the marshal."

"There, by God's hand, speaks a woman after my own heart!" swore Black Angus admiringly.

Campbell laughed softly. "Amen to that! Count me in if the time comes, Angus. Meanwhile, a dozen things may turn up to spoil the plot. Well, is that all? I'll see you safe back, Lady Anne."

"What about your own safety, Glenlyon?" she demanded.

"Oh, I'll take care of that, never fear! I can turn the other cheek like any monk."

Black Angus grunted skeptically under his breath. The girl rose.

"Very well, then. Don't forget, Angus, that Ian Cameron of Lochiel will return tomorrow with the queen, our queen. He'll be a good man to take into your confidence in this matter of Le Balafré."

"Aye," said Angus. "And good night to the two of you!"

The next installment of this novel will appear in our forthcoming January issue.

The Sheriff of

He knew how to handle all sorts of weapons; more important, he knew how to deal with all kinds of men.

SARAH knew the radio annoyed her husband; hence, when Sheriff Jeff Tolliver turned it on, Sarah turned it off. "Don't listen to that windbag of a Lon Cottle," she urged. "He'll say things that will distress you."

"I want to hear what a good rabble-rouser he is, Mother. I'm discovering I don't know Lon Cottle, although he was my chief deputy for eight years. I was foolish enough to suppose that when he resigned to oppose me at the general election, he'd still be loyal enough to make a clean campaign."

"How can he? He's the candidate of a dirty crowd. The idea of accusing you of taking graft!"

"He didn't accuse me; he just hinted my political morals would bear scrutiny. Nobody in Los Brancos County thinks I ever took a cent of graft, so he won't win any votes by throwing dirt. What hurts my chance is his continuous harpin' about my age. . . . Gosh, I know I'm not the man I was at thirty. Being sheriff was a young man's job then—one time I was in the saddle sixty hours! And we didn't have good roads or radio and teletype—no gas or stink bombs to smoke a criminal out. You had to get close with a six-shooter. Now we have machine-guns. I've been sheriff of this county twenty-four years—six terms—and I got a couple o' scars for every term. And yet that Lon Cottle says I leave the dirty dangerous work to my deputies!"

"Everybody knows you do not, Jeff, if you could only speak over the radio, you'd reach the people."

Jeff couldn't, and he thought it was time Sarah quit bringing that up. She knew he suffered from "mike fright." His youthful opponent was hinting that because for a year Jeff had not made any arrests of men who maintained slot-machines in defiance of the law, there was a reason. He left it to his listeners to guess the reason. It was true Jeff had ceased to raid the slot-machine gentry—because he couldn't get the district attorney to prosecute. He knew a profit of over three hundred per cent on every coin dropped in a slot machine will pay for a lot of graft and leave considerable for dividends. Of course, he hadn't charged the district attorney with accepting bribes. He didn't know for sure—so he kept his mouth closed.

"The gambling interests are behind Lon, Mother," he said. He had been telling her that for weeks. "Somebody's spending a fortune to elect Lon—and the Cottles haven't got it. Mother, I'm licked. I'm too wise politically not to realize that. Why, already, our best citizens are criticizing me for bringing that Judge Pinckney killer in alive. They're sayin' I should have shot him an' claimed he resisted arrest. They say I proved myself a mighty poor friend of the judge."

Sarah knew she could not comfort him, and she did not try. Then the telephone rang, and Jeff answered it. When he hung up, he said: "That was Phil Murray's wife. She says Phil's sick—nothin' serious, but Doc Kenneston said it wouldn't hurt him to stay in bed a day or two."

Phil Murray was Jeff's deputy on night duty at the jail during the present month, and his illness meant that Jeff would have to take over Murray's trick at the jail tonight. He jammed his sombrero down on his silvery head and left the house without kissing Sarah good-bye.

The door of the jail garage was wide open when he drove in. This was a violation of orders. The garage door and the front door should have been closed and bolted when the night jailer came on duty at six o'clock, and here it was seven-thirty. He rode the elevator to the main floor, and found the front door unlocked. Then his telephone rang; the operator said: "Pilarcitos is calling Sheriff Tolliver."

"This is Tolliver."

"This is Miss Pearsall, daughter of the postmistress at Pilarcitos. A farmer near here has murdered three people; and your deputy, Glen Nichol, and two highway patrol officers have him cornered at his farm. One of the patrol officers has just come back and says the man will not surrender to anybody but you. He's afraid he'll be lynched if Glen Nichol takes him, so Glen wants you to come down."

"Thanks, young lady. I'll leave here in three minutes." Jeff punched a button, a bell clanged upstairs and the night jailer came down. The Sheriff explained that Phil Murray was sick, that he, the Sheriff, had come down to take over Murray's shift and that now he was summoned to Pilarcitos to arrest a wholesale murderer. "You'll



be alone here, Vaughan," he warned, "and I want you to be particularly careful. There's a lot of bad feeling about that Pinckney killer, and if it was known I was out of town and you all alone here, a mob might form and take over. You keep the doors closed. I found both doors open when I arrived, and I'm not pleased with you, Vaughan."

Vaughan was standing in the door of the garage when Jeff drove out. The Sheriff turned the corner into the highway leading to Pilarcitos, then parked his car, got out and peered around the corner at the jail garage door. Vaughan was running down the street, and Jeff saw him enter a drugstore. So the Sheriff drove back to the jail garage and ascended to the main floor. Vaughan had left both doors open again, and the Sheriff did not bother to close them.

WHEN the night jailer returned, Jeff said: "I came back because I overlooked something. Step into my private office." When Vaughan entered, Jeff closed the door on him and locked and bolted it from the general office side, and pulled the telephone plug out of the switchboard. The windows of the private office were jail windows, so he knew Vaughan would not escape to telephone the mob leaders that Jeff Tolliver had returned and suspected trouble. The Sheriff suspected Vaughan had telephoned from the drugstore because he feared a call from the office might be traced.

Los Brancos

By PETER B. KYNE



"It aint every sheriff that shoots him a mess o' mobsters and then provides medical attendance," Jeff told his prisoners.

Jeff telephoned Doctor Kenneston. "Did you call on Phil Murray this evening, Doc?" he asked.

"Yes, Jeff."

"What's wrong with him?"

"I think he's just a little bit tired of night duty, Jeff."

"Thanks, Doc. Just thought I'd check up on him. Better drop down to the jail. Your services may be in demand."

So that was it, eh? Murray was building an alibi for himself. He suspected or knew a lynching was contemplated; he was in sympathy with the project, and knew that if he went on duty, he would have to perform manfully if Jeff Tolliver got wind of the party and came down to take charge. So he was cooperating by pretending illness; thus he would escape criticism after the job was finished. Vaughan's plan, of course, had been to plead he had been left alone at the jail (an indirect jab at Jeff Tolliver) and had been overwhelmed. Perhaps both men had been promised a re-appointment by Lon Cottle as a reward for their co-operation!

The front doorbell rang, and Jeff Tolliver hastened around to a cabinet containing the switches that controlled the electric circuits in the jail. As he got there he heard the elevator descending to the garage. . . . Presently he heard it ascending; and when he thought it was halfway between the garage and the main floor, he pulled a switch. The emergency brakes caught and kept the cage from falling—and

Jeff Tolliver knew he had quite a flock of birds in that cage! He had already locked and bolted the steel door at the head of the stairs leading to the garage, so he knew now he could not be attacked from the rear. He had also taken a .22-caliber revolver and a machine-gun out of his arsenal. Seizing these weapons, he scurried upstairs.

Twelve men with small sacks over their heads came in. . . . From his seat on the top step Jeff Tolliver said: "Good-evening, boys. Welcome to the Hotel Tolliver. Twelve, eh? You seem to have no stragglers, so close and bolt the door behind you, and then pass through the gate in the office railing, open the door leading to my private office and enter. That double-crossing night-jailer of mine is in there waiting to tell you all hell's to pay and no pitch hot. Move along, boys. First man into my private office gets a Lon Cottle campaign cigar."

The twelve men stared up at him. Jeff said: "I just love surprises. You didn't expect to see me here, did you—after Vaughan had told you I was breaking the speed laws on my way to Pilarcitos?"

A man—evidently the leader, said in a voice intended to be disguised: "Jeff, we've come for that murderer, and nothing you can do will stop us."

"I know my duty. I took an oath of office, and I'll uphold it here or die. Get going!"

"Don't be a fool, Jeff. Don't force us to manhandle you. You can't shoot two ways at once."

"I don't have to. The rear guard is in the elevator stuck between floors."

"Jeff, don't make it hard for yourself." The leader started up the stairs, and the Sheriff said: "Please be sensible, Ellis. You know how it'll hurt me if I have to bust you."

"I know. But I also know you. You wouldn't shoot a friend to save a rotten murderer—particularly not in the middle of your campaign for reelection. Drop the gun, Jeff. You're up against public opinion."

Jeff shot him through the thigh with the twenty-two. "The next shot, if you ask for it, will go through your fool head," he warned, and started down the stairs, his machine-gun at the ready. "All hands into my private office," he ordered, "or the morticians in this town will be swamped with new business."

The mob did not move, and Jeff realized they were waiting for him to get close so somebody could seize his gun. So he shot two more men. "I'm usin' a .22 gun," he explained, "because I don't want to tear a big hole, but if I squeeze the trigger o' this machine-gun, there'll certainly be a smear of one-legged men in this town. Get goin', boys!"

THEY surged away from him now, and he watched carefully to see no guns were drawn, though he didn't think any of his visitors would be that foolish; they had not planned it that way, and he knew that nothing is so helpless as a mob whose carefully made plan has been frustrated. When the last man disappeared into his private office, he sat down at his desk and started playing solitaire.

Presently the front doorbell rang. Jeff looked through the wicket and saw Doctor Kenneston standing outside. "You're just in time, Doc," he said, and ushered the physician into his private office. "It aint every sheriff that shoots him a mess o' mobsters and then provides medical attendance," he told his prisoners. "I reckon all these fellers are friends o' mine, but still I'm playin' favorites. Doc, you look after Ellis Cottle first."

He peered out into the street through the wicket in the front door and saw a crowd was gathering. He was not surprised. The men he had captured had planned to do a quiet, swift job and



"There aint going to be any lynching, and I order you folks to disperse."

evidently their plan had become known; so now when it appeared something had gone wrong with their time schedule, those in the know had come down to the jail to discover why. It was the Sheriff's duty to warn this crowd, so he stood in the open doorway and said:

"Yes, it's dodderin' old Jeff Tolliver, the Sheriff of Los Brancos County, all alone in his own jail an' practically ready to die o' senile decay. However, there's only one mob, so I'm not worryin'. I have the executive committee—all friends of the late beloved Judge Pinckney—where they can sit quietly and think it over. So there aint going to be any lynching and I order you folks to disperse."

He went inside and barred the door again. He had done his duty, and now nature could take her course. It would, he realized; for the crowd, robbed of its prey and excitement, was

booing him. Jeff shook his silvery head. He knew the youngsters would take over now and storm the jail to rescue the executive committee and complete the job it had started.

In a little while he put a half dozen tear-gas bombs in his pocket, picked up a gas-gun, went up on the second floor, knocked out a pane by poking the gun-barrel through the opaque glass, and had a very good view of the mob now jamming the street from curb to curb. From a pile of lumber in front of a house under construction across the street, a young man stood haranguing the crowd. Jeff exploded a gas-bomb against the lumber-pile, and knew that speech would not be resumed. . . . He fired four more bombs against the lumber-pile because he knew the gas would drift back into the crowd.

Reprisal came promptly. Every window in the front of the jail was shat-

tered by bricks taken from the pile of building material. Jeff sighed. That would mean a charge against the municipality for broken and lost bricks. Realizing his own gas would now drift in on him, he opened the windows on the opposite side of the jail so the resultant draft would carry the greatly diluted fumes away.

Suddenly he heard a wild, almost joyous outcry that subsided within a minute. "They have captured the city police force," Jeff thought. "Twelve patrolmen and the chief. An easy job." The cops wouldn't fight too hard in a matter that concerned the county. He suspected a few State highway patrol officers had appeared when, a little later, he heard some pistol-shots, followed by a defiant roar from the mob. The patrol had fired into the air and decided to await reinforcements.

The Sheriff now heard cries of "Gangway! Gangway!" Upon opening the wicket in the front door, he saw men approaching with a long stick of six-by-six timber taken from the pile of lumber across the street. He could not risk even one crash against his door with that formidable battering-ram, so he shot three men through the legs before the gang dropped the timber and fled.

"Reckon there won't be any more o' that," he decided.

When gas-bombs commenced coming through the windows on the second floor and exploding there, he realized the mob had raided the police arsenal. Well, the gas was going out as fast as it came in.

PRESENTLY he heard the sound of blows, punctuated by occasional metallic ringing. He went upstairs and found men on ladders picking at the bricks in which the window bars were imbedded. "What'll you have, boys?" he queried cheerfully. "Cold lead or hot water?"

The ladders were deserted immediately. However, Jeff had too many windows to guard, so he brought Judge Pinckney's murderer down to the general office and returned to the first floor. He heard a ripping, tearing sound in the end of his jail presently, and discovered a steel cable had been hooked to the bars of a window. A huge motor-truck on the other end of the cable had jerked the frame of bars out of its brick-and-concrete setting.

Jeff stuck his head out. "All right, boys, come in. It won't be necessary to tear the jail down."

He went downstairs again. . . . He could hear man after man as he thudded to the floor from the window-sill. . . . He counted the thuds. Thirty-two! Then a man came to the head of the stairs and looked down at him.

"Howdy, son," Jeff greeted him, "I'm comin' up now, and I'm comin' smokin' in' with the machine-gun, on account

you fools are more or less bunched in the corridors." He fired a short burst over the man's head, and the fellow vanished. He thought: "Well, that will about conclude the program. Those boobs are machine-gun-conscious now." He had discovered a long time ago that, unless an illegal act can be accomplished without opposition, conscience becomes an ally of the law. He waited ten minutes, went upstairs, and found his jail empty. He looked down into the street. The mob had dwindled fifty per cent. So he returned his murderer to his cell, and went downstairs to answer the front doorbell. Through the wicket he saw four reporters and four news-photographers, all from the metropolitan papers. He knew them all, so he let them in, gave them their own way for a couple of minutes, made light of the incident, and was photographed with his machine-gun. "Now, then, Sheriff," one of the reporters said, "we'd like to interview and photograph the committee on arrangements. We understand you have them here?"

"I have, and they're not going to be photographed, or interviewed and humiliated to provide you boys with a good story. They're friends of mine."

"So you'll compound a felony, eh? A mob breaks into your jail, and you condone the act!"

"No mob broke into my jail. I let some of my friends in. They were welcome."

"Sheriff Tolliver, are you nuts? We have it straight that the man who organized this mob and led it—"

"But you dassen't mention his name until you know for sure. And I don't like to have a punk like you get fresh with me. I've had all the abuse I'm going to stand for one night. Clear out, or stay—I have plenty empty cells!"

The press departed, vowing vengeance, and Jeff threw the elevator switch back in and brought the cage to the first floor. "Beat it, boys," he warned, "and keep your hoods on. The press'll be at the garage door, but I reckon you boys aint feelin' so low you can't handle your own publicity. Good night. You might close the garage door as you go out."

He unlocked the door of his private office, opened it a couple of inches and called: "Hoods on, boys! . . . Doc, I'm goin' upstairs, so I'll pay you off now. Three first-aid cases at five dollars a throw. Here's fifteen bucks. I wouldn't want you to be sending any o' these boys a bill, because that'd embarrass them. They just naturally got to remain *nux vomica*."

"Keep your money, Jeff. They're all on my free list tonight."

"All right then, boys. Go home. I'm a wise monkey. I see no evil, hear no evil and speak no evil. I aint recognized none o' you boys so's I could swear to it in court. I'm old an' dod-

derin' an' I got a failin' memory, although if you boys fail to take up a collection to mend my jail, I might name one or two of you. You don't hand this bill for damages to the taxpayers. Now, get out o' here. If you meet some o' the press outside, knock 'em out of your way. Those boys think they're hell on the mountain-top. Good night, boys. Doc, leave me a few aspirins on the counter, please. I got a splittin' headache."

SARAH, who always got up first to read the morning paper, woke Jeff Tolliver by pulling the blankets off him. "Lon Cottle's quit," she cried. "He's given out a statement to the press. He takes back everything he said about you being too old for the job, and while his name will appear on the ballot because the ballots are printed, he asks his friends to vote for you if they have the best interests of this county at heart. The hypocrite says you kept it civilized."

"Sarah, I take it right nice o' Lon to do that. Naturally, in the heat of a campaign, a feller says things he don't mean."

"He's a scrub, and I'll never forgive him. He quit because his father and the best citizens in town made him quit. Ellis Cottle came limping into the Elks' Club night before last, complaining about his rheumatism, declaring that after waiting a week for you to use certain information you had as deadly campaign material against his son, you proved yourself, as always, a friend o' the Cottle clan, and the finest sport in Los Brancos County, and he was ashamed even of thinking of dumping you in favor of his son."

"Good old Ellis! He was always my friend."

"God give me patience!" Sarah cried.

"Why, Sarah, I'm surprised at you! This morning when you got out of bed you knelt down an' asked God to forgive you your trespasses as you forgive those who trespass against you. Didn't you, Sarah?"

"Yes, I did," Sarah admitted beligerently, "but when Lon Cottle intimated you were a grafter—why, Jeff Tolliver, how can you be so soft as—"

"Now, now, Mother," Jeff interrupted, "don't you go to currying me because I can't hold a grudge. My friends—"

"A fine lot of friends you have!"

"They're the best I've been able to accumulate in a lifetime, Sarah, so I reckon I'll have to make them do. They belong to my generation. . . . Old fogies like us don't make many new friends, Sarah. All we can do is try to be brave while we're slowly losin' those we have. We can't be choosy if we expect to have pallbearers."

"Fooey!" said Sarah.

"I been shooting ducks out of the same blind with Ellis since we were in high school. I've played poker with him every Thursday night—"

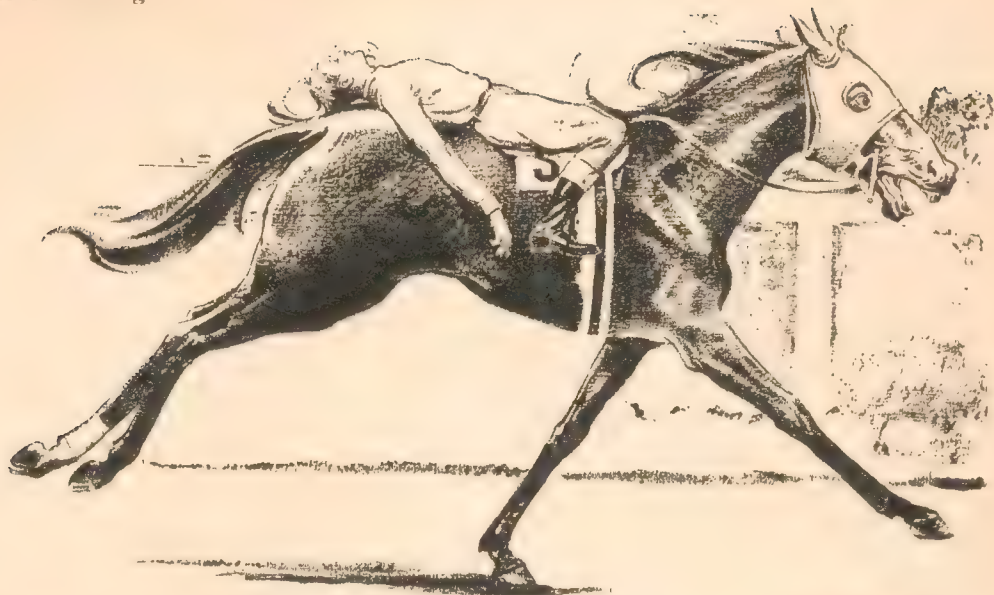
"Everybody says he hasn't rheumatism. You shot him."

But Jeff would not commit himself. He said patiently: "Mother, if you'll just consent to quit hurtin' my feelings by ripping Ellis Cottle up the back, I'll take you to the convention of the National Association of Sheriffs. It meets this year in New York. You always wanted to take a trip to New York an' now I can do it at the expense of the county. And I'll tell you one place we're certainly goin', Mother, an' that's out to the Snake House at the Bronx Zoo. I want to see the king cobra, on account I read somewhere he's the most ornery serpent on earth—he spits at folks that annoy him."



"Gangway! Gangway!" Men, approaching with a timber—a formidable battering ram.

Illustrated by
Charles Chickering



The Remarkable Tal-

I FINALLY got rid of the child prodigy, but it took time and effort and it nearly took muscle. The mother was worse than the brat. Every time I got a chance to stick a word in edgewise, which was once every sixteen and a half minutes by actual Elgin, I'd get as far as, "That's fine. Now if you'll just leave your name and phone num—" Then Mamma, beaming with parental pride, would say, "Now, honey lamb, be Shirley Temple for the nice man." And off we'd go again.

When Honey Lamb finally stopped being Jane Withers and Shirley Temple and Deanna Durbin, and gosh—I think she was even Lionel Barrymore once!—I succeeded in cramming her and her precious mamma out the door by main force. Then I faltered back to my desk and collapsed.

Which was the signal for the phone to ring, and it was the boss; and as usual he was one decibel from apoplexy.

"Lafferty?" he howled.
"He just stepped out," I said. "He'll be back in a minute or next Tuesday."

Only three years old, Egbert already could talk. And when we tell you that Egbert was a horse, you will concede that his talent was as remarkable as its results were surprising.

"Don't give me that!" he spluttered. "Lafferty, do you know what day it is?"

"Friday," I said. "I know it's Friday because I always go broke on Fridays."

The receiver tortured the cardrums. "Very well, Mr. Funny-schmunny, if you won't tell, I will. Today is the 26th of May. Come day after tomorrow you've been with Ace Pictures exactly six months. In all that time you've done not one thing to earn your salt—not to mention your salary.

"Now I give you fair warning, if by four days from now you aint gone out and found us a new star, Ace Pictures is going to gladly unrenuew your option. I aint asking for no miracles—all I want is somebody colossal or at least superb. Do you understand?"

I choked.

"Four days! But listen, boss—"

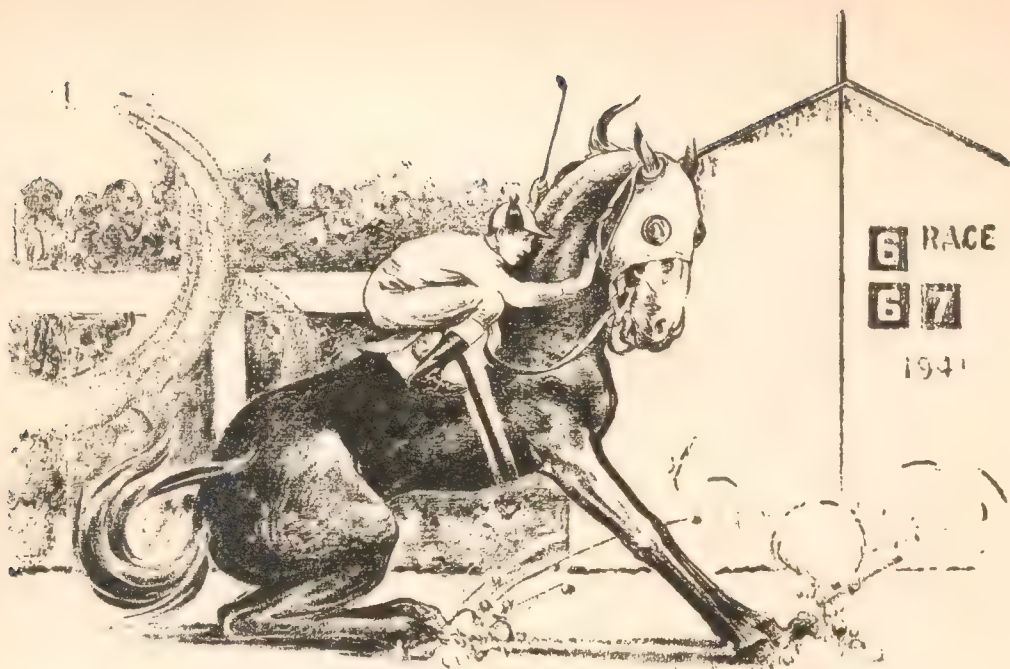
"No more," rasped my master's voice. "No less. Good afternoon, Mr. Lafferty."

The connection went *plunk*. And so did my spirits.

Talent-scouting for a Hollywood filmadhouse was not the breeze I had blissfully believed when, six months before, I had allowed myself to be Horace-Greeleyed from a less lucrative but infinitely more restful berth on a New York newspaper. Real star material is rarer than you think. For every glamour-girl who busts out of her sweaters into the public eye, there are ten thousand cornfeds and crackpots to infest the premises of the unlucky talent-oglers.

It was true that I hadn't unveiled any talent for Ace Pictures. But it was equally true that I couldn't afford to lose my job—not after having just splurged on a new car and contracted for a year's rental on one of those patios-with-bird-bath that Hollywood-be's like to call home.

So the boss' ultimatum drained all the starch out of my backbone. I was sitting there morbidly plotting a way



ent of Egbert Haw

by NELSON
BOND

to beat my creditors to the State line, when the phone jangled again. I picked it up.

"Yes?" I said.

"Are you," asked a voice at the other end of the wire, "the Ace Pictures' talent-scout?"

"I used to be," I said gloomily, "beginning next week. Why?"

My caller had an odd, husky, nickering sort of voice. He said, "I think someone in your company would like to meet me. My name is Egbert Haw."

"Egbert *who*?"

"Not who—*Haw*!"

"Haw, huh?" I said. "Well, what do you do to dazzle the great American public?"

"I—I have a rather unusual talent," stated my caller complacently. "You see, I'm only three years old—"

I sighed. There it was again. Another child prodigy. They must grow on Hollywood trees like oranges.

"—and I can talk!" concluded Egbert triumphantly.

"So," I agreed caustically, "you can talk! So what? Egbert, you'd better hang up the phone before Mamma

comes home. In the past six months I've met approximately one million three-year-olds. Most of them can dance and sing and juggle twelve hoops while waving the Star Spangled Banner with their teeth. But *all* of them can talk. There's nothing unusual about that!"

My caller sniffed disdainfully. "Of course not," he retorted, "for children. But—I'm a *horse*!"

See what I mean? I hung up. What else was there to do? There are more cracked pates in Hollywood than there are days of unusual weather. And thinking of days reminded me that I only had four left in which to reestablish myself in the chief's good graces. There was nothing to be gained by lolling around my hotel-room, so I went out.

How long I walked the streets aimlessly I don't exactly know. It must have been quite a while, for I finished what had been almost a full pack of cigarettes, and when I looked around for a place to get more, discovered I had wandered to one of those smaller, quieter suburbs of Beverly Hills unfrequented by Iowa tourists. I was just stepping from a corner tobacconist's, wrestling with the cellophane strait jacket of my smokes, when a faint, husky voice whispered somewhere near my ear: "Hey, buddy, want to make a few bucks?"

I started. The street was deserted save that at the street-curbing a few feet away stood a peddler's produce-wagon. The vender wasn't there, but between the shafts of the dray stood a rather ordinary-looking horse. There was not another living creature in sight but the horse and myself.

I stammered: "Who—who said that?"

"I did," said the horse irately. "Well, speak up. Do you?"

I stared at him numbly. "You—you're *talking*!"

"All right, so I'm talking!" he retorted. Then he nodded sulkily. "I get it. You think just because I'm pulling a huckster's cart I'm nothing but a plug. Well, don't let appearances deceive you, pal. I didn't always do this for a living. You may not believe it, but I'm a Thoroughbred. I spring from the finest line of horseflesh in the United States. My parents were champions. And before I got into *this mess*—he bobbed his head disgruntledly toward the shafts on either side of him—"I was a darn' fine race-horse myself. Took six firsts out of seven starts, and set a new track record for two-year-olds at Pimlico before my boss got drunk and entered me in a claiming race. And now look at me." He sighed. "But the hell with that! You want to make a few bucks? I've got a proposition for you. I want to get in touch with a man named Joe Lafferty, down at Ace Pictures."

I got it then. "Haw!" I gasped. "You're Egbert Haw!"

"That's right," he nodded. "I'm Eg— Hey! How did you know?"

"I'm Joe Lafferty," I told him, "of Ace Pictures. I talked to you a couple of hours ago. But I had no idea—"

"What luck!" gloated Egbert Haw. "I've been trying to get in touch with you for weeks. But that dumb jerk who owns me— Damn! Look out! Here he comes now. Don't let him see us talking together. He's suspicious as all get-out."

My heart was thumping like a cart on a cobbled street. I said, "But, Haw, this is tremendous! I've got to talk to you."

"Not now," he whispered back. "Look! I've got an idea. You buy me, see? Buy me and take me home with you, and we'll have all the time we want to talk things over. *Shhh!*" And he fell silent as the huckster came within earshot.

His owner peered at me hopefully as he approached. "You waitin' for me, Mister? Wanta buy some red ripe tomatoes? Lettuce? Celery?"

"No, thanks," I said.

"Oranges, carrots, fresh green peas?"

"Not today," I told him. I coughed gently, as with a discouraged shake of the head, he started to climb into his cart. "Nice-looking horse you have there."

"You think so?"

"Very nice-looking." I spoke more hurriedly as he picked up the reins. "Matter of fact, I'd like to own a horse like that. I don't suppose he happens to be for sale?"

The huckster laid down the reins. "Mister," he said flatly, "everything on this cart's for sale—including me. So you've taken a fancy to this nag, huh? Well, make me an offer."

"What would you want for him?"

"What's he worth to you?" he countered.



I reached into the hat and pulled out a number. "A hundred?" I suggested.

The huckster snorted and picked up the reins again. "Good-by, Mister," he said. "Giddyup!"

"Wait a minute!" I cried hastily. "How about two hundred? Three?"

"Make it five!" he asked cannily.

"Four," I said.

"Four-fifty, and I'll throw in the cart."

Four-fifty represented exactly two-thirds of my present bank-balance, but I couldn't get my check-book out fast enough.

"Done!" I said, and handed him the slip of paper.

He blew on it, folded it, and tucked it into his hip pocket. He climbed down from the cart and handed me the reins. "Take it away, Mister," he said. "It's yours. And if you're thinking of going into the huckster business, you'd better cover the streets north of here. I been south already." Then he grinned. "I guess you think you made a good buy, don't you?"

"I—I don't know what you mean," I lied.

He snorted belligerently. "Well, I know, Mister. And you can take it from me, that horse played you for a sucker. He's the damndest liar that ever wore a bit in his mouth. That there horse aint never won a race in his life!" Beaming triumphantly, he stalked away, with Egbert Haw glaring after him angrily.

"THE first problem," I pondered, "is—how am I going to put you across to the studio?"

"The first problem," corrected Egbert Haw, "is when do we eat? You're

a hell of a host, Lafferty! I haven't had a bite since breakfast."

"Oh," I said, "I'm sorry. I'm afraid I'm not used to entertaining horses. What can I get you?"

"Oh, anything at all," said Egbert casually. "I'm not choosy. Just call the nearest feed-store and tell them to send up today's *stable d'hôte*."

We were in the patio of my Beverly Hills bungalow, a location fortunately screened from the view of passers-by. Egbert sat down on the glider, crossed his legs and yawned luxuriously.

"You can't imagine what a relief it is to get rid of that confounded cart. Now, what's all this about the studio? What's wrong with just taking me down and introducing me around?"

I shook my head decisively. "It won't do, Haw. You don't know Hollywood. That's not the way they stage things around here. I just can't walk in and say: 'Look, boss, I've found a talking horse.' We'd get laughed out of the joint."

"Even if I talked?" demanded Egbert.

"Even if you talked. They'd think it was all a gag—that you were an equine Charlie McCarthy or something. No, we've got to cook up an angle—a build-up of some kind—something spectacular. Wait a minute!" I stared at him speculatively. "I think I've got it. Haw, can you run?"

"Can I run!" he demanded indignantly. "Why, listen here—I placed first in five out of seven races as a two-year-old, and set a new track record at Havre de Grace."

"It was six out of seven," I reminded him, "at Pimlico—the first time you told me. Come clean now! Can you run, or can't you?"

Egbert frowned sulkily. "Why, I suppose so," he said. "I don't really know for sure. I never tried. But then I never tried to talk until a couple of weeks ago, and discovered I could." He brightened. "I beat the hell out of a milk-wagon plug down on Dock Street the other morning. Gave him two lengths and beat him to the trough."

"You're sure it was a milk-wagon?" I demanded eagerly. "Now—not a bread-wagon?"

"No, it was a milk-wagon. Why?"

"In that case," I told him gleefully, "you ought to be fast enough for what I have in mind. They're running a catchweight stakes at Santa Anita tomorrow for horses owned by members of the film colony. It's the perfect set-up. You win that race; then when I take you into the judges' circle to get the award, you'll make the speech of acceptance instead of me—"

"Hey!" said Egbert enthusiastically. "I think you've got something there! That sounds swell. Where do we sign up for this shindig?"

"At the track."

"Well, then"—and he hopped off the glider, impatiently switching his tail—"climb aboard, Lafferty! What are we waiting for?"

BILL LESCURE was taking entries for the Hollywood stakes. He looked up in amazement as Egbert and I approached his pavilion on the track.

"Why, hello, Joe! When did you start racing horses? Not a bad-looking piece of horseflesh you have there."

"Thanks," said Egbert and I simultaneously.

Fortunately, Bill was looking only at me, but he looked sort of puzzled. He said: "You got a cold, Joe? You sound a little hoarse."

"More so," I told him grimly, "than you think." I kicked Egbert in the near hock and motioned him to silence. I said: "You still taking entries for the race?"

"Sure, you want to enter?" He reached for a sheet of paper. "Well, the more the merrier. What's the horse's name?"

"Egbert," said Egbert.

"Egbert," I said.

Bill glanced up, puzzled. "Egbert-Egbert? That's a funny name."

"The man who named him," I explained hastily, "stuttered." I glared at Egbert. He shrugged.

"Age?" asked Bill.

"Three," said Egbert.

"Three," I said.

"I heard you the first time," said Bill. "Three. Okay. Color?"

"Red," I said.

"Roan," said Egbert indignantly.

"Well, make up your mind," fretted Bill. He glanced at Egbert thoughtfully. He said: "Of course, it's none of my business, Joe, but it costs a century to enter this race. And I never heard of this nag of yours before. Are you sure he can run? He doesn't look very fast to me."

"The race is not always to the swift," snorted Egbert.

Bill's head came up with a start. "Who said that?" he demanded.

"Æsop," I told him hurriedly.

Bill stared at me dubiously. "You're acting mighty funny today, Joe. And that horse of yours is peculiar, too. Oh, well!" He returned to his slip of paper. "Sire—dam—foal—"

"Oh, yeah!" snorted Egbert. "Well, you're no Quiz Kid yourself, wise guy—"

"Excuse me a minute, Bill," I said loudly. I led Egbert down to the paddock. "Look, you dope," I told him savagely, "if you don't keep your big yap shut, you're going to spoil everything!"

"Well, he can't insult me like that," threatened Egbert darkly, "and get away with it. Hear what he called me? A sorry damn' fool! I'll show him!"

"You'll stay here," I said, "until I finish. And keep your mouth shut."

"Take it from me, that horse played you for a sucker. He's the damndest liar that ever wore a bit in his mouth!"



I left him and went back to the pavilion, finished filling out the blank and paid the entrance fee. The Hollywood Stakes was to be the sixth race. I made arrangements for a stall for Egbert and got the name of a good jockey from Bill. Then I went back to the paddock.

Egbert cantered up excitedly when he saw me.

"All set, Joe?" he demanded.

"All set," I told him.

"Say," he went on enthusiastically, "these race-horses do all right for themselves, you know that? I've been talking to a couple of fillies down the line. Talk about your Wage-Hour Law! They only have to work about a minute and a half one day a week. And boy, talk about easy living! They get waited on hand and foot. And what do they get paid?"

"You're telling it," I said.

"Bran, rye and oats," marveled Egbert, "once a day. And fresh, crisp hay every night of the week. What do you think of that?"

"It leaves me," I told him honestly, "speechless."

"You said it!" enthused Egbert dreamily. "And that's just small-time stuff, too. You know what Whirlaway got for winning last year's Derby? Three thousand bales of hay! Imagine it! *Three thousand bales of hay!* That aint money!"

Practically everybody you ever heard of connected with the Oomph and Ogle industry was out at the track the following afternoon. I saw Herman Bing and Bing Crosby, Lynn Bari and Barry Fitzgerald, Robert Preston and Preston Sturges, and—well, name 'em yourself. You probably read gossip columns more often than I do.

I finally identified the boss behind a violent purple-and-carmine sports coat and a pair of field-glasses. He saw me too, and came waddling over, flanked by a bevy of yes-men and dwarfed by that noblest of he-man heroes, Wingfield ("Lone Rider") Dobbins—that rootin', tootin', soft-croonin' ranger of the plains whose daredevil exploits your kiddies pay good money to watch faithfully every Saturday afternoon.

"So, Lafferty!" howled the boss. "So this is how you waste your time! Three days only you got left to prove yourself, and I find you squandering your precious hours at the races!"

I grinned at him cheerfully. "That's my one prevailing vice—the squanderlust. Anyhow, if it's such an awful place to be, what are you two doing here?"

"With me," exclaimed the boss indignantly, "it's business."

"And with me," drawled Dobbins, "it's hosses. Ah shore do love hosses, Mistah Laffuhty. The noble steed, man's true and faithful friend—"

"Read those lines again, Wing," I sniffed, "without the accent. You're among friends. Remember, I knew you when you were a shoe-clerk in Brooklyn, and were so horse-shy you wouldn't go near a merry-go-round."

Dobbins scowled. "Now look heah, Laffuhty! Them's fightin' words—"

The boss interposed his diminutive bulk hastily. He was taking no chances on having his star's million-dollar pan smeared all over the Santa Anita tanbark. "Nevertheless and howsoever," he proclaimed, "you're wasting time, Lafferty, and if I were in your shoes—"

"—you'd be kicking little pink clouds around," I told him, "just the

way I'm doing. Because I've *done* my job, boss. I found you the star you wanted."

His eyes brightened. "Yeah, Joe? Where is she?"

"It's not a she; it's a he."

"A he?" chortled the boss hopefully. "That's fine, Joey-boy. A Clock Gable type, perhaps? Or maybe a William Par! Or could be a cowboy crooner?"

"Well, more like Dobbins here," I told him, remembering that Egbert was not all head and shoulders. "I won't tell you any more just now, boss, but I can say this much: He's strikingly unusual. Supercolossal is more like it. And even that's too mild. But you'll see for yourself in a little while. After the sixth race. And by the way, you might keep an eye on my horse in that race."

"Your horse?"

"Egbert," I told him; and then, remembering Haw's *nom de track*, "Egbert-Egbert."

He shook his head dubiously. "Never heard of him."

"You will," I assured him, and left.

The paddock was not far away. Egbert's stall was No. 1. He was craning out when I appeared. There were a few grooms and swipes around but none within earshot. Egbert looked excited. He said, "Hey, Joe, who was that man I seen you with a few minutes ago—the big good-looking one in the cowboy suit?"

I snorted. "That was no man," I told him. "That was a movie hero named Wingfield—"

"Dobbins!" finished Egbert triumphantly. "I knew it the minute I laid eyes on him. Boy, he's something, aint he! What I'd give to be hooked up with a guy like that! I saw him in an open-air movie once. I was pulling the hot-dog cart between the autos. He's what I'd call a four-gaited man. He's got everything. Speed, poise, appearance—"

"And as phony," I finished, "as can be. Never mind that now, Haw. How do you feel?"

"Feel?" Egbert glared at me petulantly. "How should I feel? I'm starving! I haven't had a thing to eat since last night's dinner. And *that* had June bugs in it. What's the big idea?"

"I'll feed you," I told him, "after the race. There's a theory that horses run better on an empty stomach."

"You're thinking of snakes," said Egbert, disgruntled. "Oh, well, better late than never. How much longer now?"

"Not much," I assured him. "Another hour."

The horses lined up for the Hollywood stakes at the appointed time. There were about twelve entries in the race. Egbert hadn't drawn the post position, but he wasn't on the outside either. He looked very gay and confident as he joined the parade to the gate. I was at his side, giving final instructions to the jockey.



"All right, so I'm talking!" he retorted. . . .
"You want to make a few bucks?"

"Lay off the bat," I advised. "He's a smart horse. Just give him his head, and he'll romp home."

"Look, Mr. Lafferty," said the jock aggrievedly, "I been booting plugs home ever since I lost my bug. I guess I can handle this one. Turn around, you!"

Egbert had craned his neck around to stare at his rider. Now he nuzzled his head into my shoulder, whispered

hoarsely: "Fresh guy! Who's he calling a plug! You got something down on me, Joe?"

"A little," I whispered back cautiously. "Not much. Why, do you think you—"

"Bet your shirt," advised Egbert, with a derisive glance toward the other horses in the line-up. "I aint going to show this bunch of bums nothing but heels. What's the board quote me?"

"Twenty to one," I told him apologetically.

"It's robbery," sniffed Egbert. "Bet a million."

I didn't take a million, but I *did* take a hundred. I had so much money tied up in Egbert now that I figured another C-note or so wouldn't matter.

I had just hurried back to the rail from the pari-mutuel window when the gun boomed, the barriers lifted, and the crowd loosed its traditional roar. "*They're off!*"

The race developed swiftly. There were about a dozen entries, but the number of contenders had been cut in two by the time they reached the first post. Six of the Hollywood hopefuls faded as quickly as cheap wallpaper. At the quarter the leader, Stagefright, was the favorite. He was followed by Double Feature by a length, then Rasputin by two, Box Office and Chancellor by a head, and Egbert galloping valiantly along, three lengths behind.

They were shuffled at the half. Box Office made a bid and Rasputin faded. Egbert seemed to be holding his own. At the three-quarter mark, Chancellor dropped back and Double Feature was finished. It was a three-horse race now. As they came into the stretch, it became a two-horse race. Box Office gave up, and Egbert surged in to race nose-and-nose, neck-and-neck, shoulder-to-shoulder with the favorite.

WHAT happened then drove the crowd wild, the track stewards mad, and the news-reel men delirious. You've probably seen the pictures. They caused plenty of comment, for they showed plainly how—just as the two horses charged down the stretch—Stagefright's jockey went for his bat, but instead of using it on his horse, he half-turned in his seat and started whaling the almighty Moses out of Egbert's rider!

The crop conked my boy, laying him out as cold as a pickled mackerel. Egbert faltered momentarily, and my heart sank as I visioned a thousand bucks worth of build-up slipping into limbo. For both horses were now but a few yards from the finish line, and it was Stagefright by a length and a half.

But then the most amazing thing of all the weird spectacle transpired. Despite the fact that Stagefright's jockey was now belaboring his horse with

"You got something down on me, Joe? What's the board quote me?"



might and main, the leader faltered, braced four feet, and drew abruptly to a stop one foot short of the finish line! And Egbert, his jockey a limp, unconscious burden on his back, flashed by—the winner!

From that point on everything was all so mixed up I hardly know how to tell it. I remember climbing over the shoulders of a howling mob to fight my way down the track to Egbert's side. I remember helping to separate my own still-stunned jockey and the fighting-mad rider of Stagefright, who, crimson-faced, was babbling incoherent accusations. I dragged my jockey aside. "What was it?" I demanded. "What happened?"

My boy shook his head. He didn't know yet that the race was over, much less that he had won. But Stagefright's jockey supplied the answer.

"It's unfair!" he screamed. "It's unethical! I did *not* pull Stagefright up. He hollered 'Whoa!' at me just as we reached the finish line!"

It was a tough decision for the track stewards, but they decided in our favor, pointing out that my jockey couldn't possibly have done what the other boy claimed, inasmuch as he was unconscious at the time the race was won. And Egbert, of course, just grinned knowingly at me.

Thus came the moment for which I had planned. Calmly I led Egbert into the judge's circle for the presentation of the trophy. And there, as I had told him to be, was my boss and his companions.

And that's what upset the apple-cart. For Wingfield Dobbins was there, glowing with violent enthusiasm. As the track official made his speech of presentation, Dobbins stepped to Egbert's side, threw his arm around the horse's neck in that gesture of loving

camaraderie so familiar to *matinée-goers*.

"This heah, Laffuhty," he stated, "is the finest hoss Ah evuh seen in m' life, a hoss any man would be proud to own and to love. Ah *want* this hoss, Laffuhty. Ah *want* this hoss to co-star with me in my next picture, 'Desert Desperadoes,' and every othuh picture in the future. Name yore price, suh! This noble creatuh—"

I didn't answer him just then; I didn't have time to, for the judge was approaching me with a monstrous cup, and the news-reel camera-men were focusing their grinders on me.

"—and so, Mr. Lafferty," the judge was saying, "it gives me great pleasure to present this cup—"

And at last it was our moment! I turned to Egbert triumphantly.

"All right, Eggie, old boy," I said. "This is it. Thank the judge!"

Egbert minced forward a step, moving gently so as not to dislodge Dobbins' affectionate arm. I saw, or thought I did, a look of speculation in his eyes that turned suddenly to one of decision. And then he opened his mouth—and *whinnied*!

"Heah that?" cried Dobbins delightedly. "What a hoss! He can almost talk!"

"Almost!" I screamed. "That horse can talk! Egbert, say something!"

Just once, and fleetingly, Egbert glanced at me. Then he answered. But his answer spelled the end to all my hopes and dreams, for—

"Nyaaaaah!" said Egbert. It was a definite, a deliberate horse-laugh.

Well, I sold the horse to Dobbins. There was nothing else to do. I got a good price for him, because the studio footed the bill. And the boss was enthusiastic.

"You done fine, Lafferty," he told me. "You surprised me, though. I kept thinking it was some new male star which you found. But it turned out to be better. This new horse of Dobbins' is going to be a sensation. Better than Tom Mix's horse, even, or Rin-Tin-Tin. I'm renewing your contract, too. But I think"—he looked at me dubiously—"maybe you better take a couple of weeks' vacation down at the Springs before you start working again. I mean, I didn't know your nerves were getting so bad. The way you was talking about that talking horse and stuff—"

So that was that. I went to a psychiatrist afterward, told him the whole story from beginning to end. When I had finished, he steeped his fingers and *hrumphed* gently.

"A most interesting case-history, Mr. Lafferty," he said. "Of course, you realize that you only heard the horse talking when you were *alone* with him. Never when anyone else was around. Isn't that right?"

"Yes, that's right," I acknowledged. "But—"

"And—*hrumph*—there's one other little thing, Mr. Lafferty, that you didn't mention. I understand you were greatly upset at the prospect of being discharged. Might I ask if, on the morning you discovered the horse, you had indulged in any—*hrumph*—intoxicating beverages?"

"If you mean was I pie-eyed," I told him bluntly, "no. I *had* taken a drink or two to make me feel better—"

He shrugged and spread his hands. "Well, there you are! Perhaps that accounts for the hallucinations you experienced. After all, Mr. Lafferty, the vocal apparatus in a horse's larynx is scarcely qualified to bear the burden of human speech—"

So I dropped the matter there. He had his ideas about it, but I have mine too. And what I think is that Egbert pulled a scurvy trick on me. He saw a chance to step into the movies in a starring rôle, billed with the phony hero he most admired. So he kept his yap shut and took the opportunity.

For if the medico was right, why is it that every time I pass Egbert nowadays on the studio lot, he winks at me?



Pappas was coming on, foaming threats; behind him the cook Ramon.... Danroy fired twice.



MUTINY TAKES

MACKLIN'S thin lips drew back from white teeth. "D'you pack a gun?" he asked softly. "Think I'm a fool, or a crook?" retorted Danroy.

"Tell me more about this—about your dismissal from the Navy."

"Go to hell. I've told you the facts; they're on record. You admit that you're not doing the hiring, that your superiors must be satisfied. Well, let 'em look up the case! I wasn't dismissed. I was allowed to resign. Gambling debts and so forth."

Macklin drummed on the table with his fingers, then scowled.

"You expect me to hire you as chief officer, when you've no kind of a license at all?"

"Why not? A junior-grade lieutenant knows more navigation than you'll ever need."

"You forget, Mr. Danroy. Any officers who take a ship to sea must be duly licensed."

"Not when the ship's as crooked as yours is," Danroy retorted.

The two men sat in a small delicatessen on the upper East Side, making a meal and talking, while the radio

Strange refugees bearing wealth from America bring new tragedy to the 1941 Atlantic.

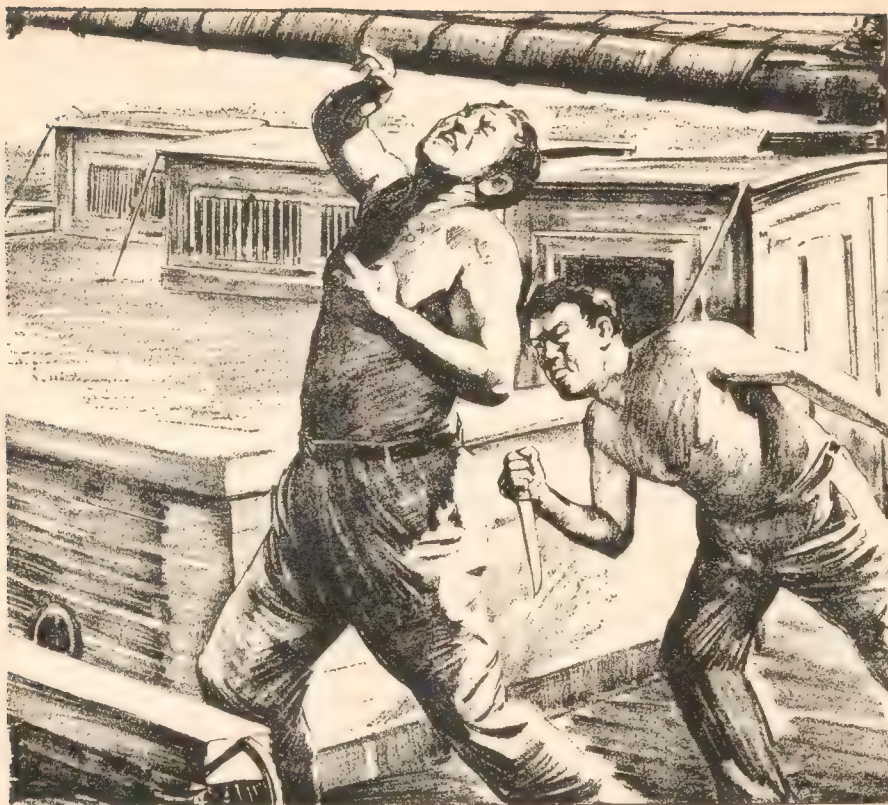
perched on the wall back of the bar yammered away interminably.

"Must be crooked," went on Danroy coolly, "or you wouldn't be using this as an office, you'd not be hiring men in the way you are. Crooked or straight, it's all one to me. I need money. For the past month I've been driving a truck to live; and driving a truck in New York City can be a hell of a job."

"No doubt," Macklin agreed. "I've been sitting three days in this cubbyhole, hiring my crew, and that's a hell of a job too."

"Then there must be money in the work ahead," said Danroy, with a curt laugh.

"There is," Macklin said with a curt nod. "More than flying bombers to Canada and Britain, more than enlisting, more than any honest work to be picked up, or honest fighting. More money, more danger too. But my first officer must be able to use his hands; there'll be a hard lot both for'ard and aft."



Illustrated
by Frederic
Anderson

THE HELM

by MICHAEL GALLISTER

Macklin was a hard lot himself; thin and smallish, with a lean scarred cheek and keen black eyes.

Danroy laughed again. "I can use my hands, feet and head, and a gun at need."

While Danroy was no bruiser, he had the cold, springing vitality that can hold far more danger than can mere brawn. Macklin could appreciate this, being the same type himself. Not even his thick seaman's reeler could bulk him out much; yet a glance at his black, alive eyes, his hard jaw and his thin lips, gave one a sense of positive peril.

A glance at Danroy gave less positive reaction. He was unshaven; his squarish features and his blue eyes held a stubborn, dogged look, as of one who may be down and out yet fights on with unrelenting grimness. He was a bit taller than Macklin, who was five feet eight; he wore sweatshirt and overalls, and they were not clean.

"I think," said Macklin, "you might be my man, Mr. Danroy. Provided, of course, that my owners agree. What time do you go to work in the morning?"

"Nine. That is, I leave my boarding-house at eight-thirty."

"At eight-thirty, if you haven't heard from me, consider yourself engaged."

"Why not give me a ring in that case? There's a phone in the dump. I gave you the number."

"I prefer not to telephone unless necessary," returned Macklin. "As a former Navy man, will you have any reluctance to go against the laws of the United States?"

"Depends," said Danroy. "What laws?"

"Wartime regulations that have worked a great hardship on innocent people."

"Blather!" Danroy said mockingly. "You or your owners want between now and morning to look up my story?"

"Of course."

"Well, you don't expect me to come aboard in this rig? I've no other clothes."

Macklin pondered. He pulled out pipe and pouch and filled up. Danroy, from tiny signs such as "United States" for "Federal," had already ticketed him as English or possibly Canadian in origin; at the first whiff of the tobacco, he was positive of it, for the weed was a black Irish twist, chopped fine.

"I'll take a chance," said Macklin with decision. He produced a twenty-dollar bill and pushed it across the table. "In case I telephone you that it's off, I'll lose the money. That'll be enough to get your things out of pawn."

"Thanks." Danroy pocketed the note. "You must want my services badly."

"God knows I do," Macklin said, as though the Deity were in his confidence. "I've had to take on a terrible lot! Just now, what with the war and the Navy, any seaman with any sort of ticket is sure of a berth at high pay. So I've taken the sweepings."

"Thanks for the compliment."

"When the facts are obvious, why not accept them? I've taken your word about not being a drinking man." Macklin's air was lightly mocking. "Besides, what you say is obviously true. A truck-driver can't be a heavy drinker. The terms are three hundred a month, as I told you, and a bonus if all goes well. Five hundred paid in advance before tomorrow night, any place in New York you may want it paid. You'll be sure of having that here, if and when you get back. We leave tomorrow night, you see."

Danroy nodded. "Fair enough. When and where do I report?"

"Know where the Starzel Construction Company is?"

"No."

"On the East River, rather obscured by the new parkway but still doing a bit of barge business and contract work," said Macklin. "Be there at six p.m., sober. You have intelligence, Mr. Danroy; I think we'll get on. I'm thankful to have one navigating officer."

"You'll need him, with a yacht."

Macklin smiled in his thin, toothy way.

"When I spoke of a yacht, that was merely a form of speech. I understand she is actually a sailing-vessel. Anything with a keel is hard to get, these days; I don't anticipate too much, myself."

"I suppose I'm not to ask any questions about the owners?"

"Wouldn't do you the least good, my lad," Macklin said cheerfully. "Might do you a lot of harm, really. Well, I'm off; glad to get the smell of this place out of my nostrils. Good night and good luck. I hope you'll not hear from me."

Macklin shook hands. He had gnarled, misshapen hooks with cracked and furrowed hide. As Danroy walked out of the place he glanced back and saw Macklin paying the slatternly waitress.

"Britisher, perhaps R.N.," decided Danroy. "A bad streak. He's been knocking about on the Banks for a year or so, to judge by his hands. That scar on his face isn't too old. Perhaps he got chucked out of the Navy in the early part of the war. Took a liking to me; Navy style, eh? A kindred spirit. What on earth can the game be? Smuggling? Not likely; nothing to smuggle, these days. Yet he spoke of Federal laws. And how the devil does he expect to get a sailing-vessel and illegal crew out of the East River, with the Navy and the Coast Guard on the prowl? It's something deep, something fishy. And big money in it, at the wages they're paying."

Thus pondering, he took the subway back downtown to his very dingy lodgings.

He got his duffel out of pawn that same evening, with a few dollars to spare. He had been pretty well down to rock bottom, no fooling.

THAT evening he sat with his pipe, turning back the clock. That Navy business had not been so bad, on the surface; there were sub-surface things that never got out. The gambling, yes; in reality, a technicality. Back of the gambling was the important thing—his acquaintance with Waldreim. It all happened out in Frisco, at Mare Island Navy Yard.

To him, Waldreim was just a customers' man for a classy gambling joint in Geary Street. To the Naval board,

Waldreim was the German agent who got away with the Mare Island Naval orders; copies of them were found on him after he was shot to death. It added up two and two to make five—and with bombers off for Hawaii and Singapore and Guam and China, and everything tight as tight in the Pacific, it was safer to make an error in addition than to take chances.

So Danroy was out. Flint was out, too, caught in the same boat. Tough, because Flint was a lieutenant commander and had a family.

"Flint might have been the guy, at that," reflected Danroy over his pipe. "Well, no matter now. This job will be straight law-breaking and no undercover stuff, thank God!"

He had suspected it from the start, naturally; from the moment he saw Macklin's ad in the paper. Nobody had to advertise for seamen these days. All hands had jobs except the Italian and German seamen, who could ship nowhere; they were locked inside the U. S. borders now, till the war's end. They were locked in, and all their money and securities and other chattels were locked in, too. Macklin must have taken on a fine lot of bums!

Danroy shrugged and went to bed and slept like a top.

MORNING found him up as usual. At eight he had breakfasted and was back in his room, reading the morning paper—his door open, one ear cocked for the ring of the telephone. It came, but there was no call for him; he went on reading. There was no denying the tension of his wait as the moments passed. The hands of his cheap alarm-clock crept on and touched eight-thirty.

He had the job.

He went to work as usual, but only in order to draw his time; this put a few more dollars in his pocket. He was affluent now, by comparison. His was the luxury of an idle day, without fear of starving on the morrow. Wonderful feeling!

He loafed. He narrowed his few belongings to what he wore and what he could stuff into an old grip. In his mind lingered the odd query from Macklin: "D'you pack a gun?" He did not, and wanted none. The man who trusts to a gun is a man who distrusts himself. But, with such queer company as lay ahead, a weapon of shock and surprise might come in handy.

So he haunted the pawnshops and dives about his downtown residence, and found what he was after. No more than a mammoth fountain pen in appearance, half a dozen .38 shells went with it, each stoppered with red wax: it was a tear-gas outfit, and very neat.

"But mind," cautioned the seller, "possession in this State means stir! So clip it in your inside pocket."

"I hope to be out of the State before night," said Danroy, and went his way with the toy safely stowed out of sight.

He subwaved uptown, parked his grip at Grand Central, lunched like a lord at Longchamps, then sought Broadway and spent the rest of the afternoon at a movie palace. At five-thirty he picked up his grip, boarded a taxi, and gave the Starzel Company's address.

Now, for the first time, it occurred to him that Starzel was a German name. Like thousands of others, of course, between the Battery and Yorkville; what of it? Yet he was still frowning and alert when the taxi curved under a span of the new parkway and deposited him at his destination. Five to six.

"Keep the change," said Danroy, and bag in hand, walked into the old and out-of-date brick building stretching along the river-front. There were no craft of any kind in sight except a couple of barges loading gravel and a tug keeping them company.

In the dingy office, Macklin was waiting for him, and greeted him with a nod.

"Right on the minute, eh? I've a slicker here for you, and a cap; no gold braid this cruise. Rain's ahead tonight. You're the last to show up. We're going to be a bit crowd-

ed, but not for long, I trust. Sandwiches and coffee aboard, so come along."

Macklin turned to a bookkeeper on a stool, the only other person in sight.

"All shipshape, Joe," he said. "Phone in word that we're off."

"Hold on," said Danroy. "What about that five hundred advance you mentioned?"

Macklin took an envelope from the bookkeeper and thrust it at him—a fat one.

"There y'are, minus the twenty I gave you. I got yours in cash. Satisfied?"

Danroy nodded and pocketed the envelope without investigating the contents. He followed Macklin through the building, which seemed oddly deserted, and outside. Here, as they threaded a way among huge piles of construction materials, Macklin took his arm.

"Waterfront thieves," he observed. "The best-organized lot I ever saw. Would I trust 'em to pay five hundred to anybody? Not me. I said you'd demanded yours in cash."

"Oh!" said Danroy, comprehending. "Thanks. Thieves? Not these construction people?"

"I wouldn't put it past them," muttered the other. "No. Not them, to be honest about it. But the lads running the show ahead."

He nodded at the ancient, dirty, half-ruined wharf showing up. A barge lay alongside, men just closing its huge hatches. The tug and another barge lay beyond her. Macklin nodded to the men.

"All right," he said. "We're ready when you are. Rain's coming fast."

Danroy followed him over the rail of the barge. Macklin pointed to her deck-house as he led toward it.

"Too bad we can't ride aboard that tug, but they won't have it. Too many police boats about. Not a soul must show. So here we are. Thank the Lord, most of the crew's aboard the other scow. You couldn't have seen a worse lot o' rats in packet-ship days. Mind your head!"

They stepped over a water-sill into darkness. A farther door opened, and Danroy found himself in a commodious cabin crowded with chairs and with people and lighted not too well by a lamp slung in gimbals. The windows were closed and curtained.

"All right, we're off," Macklin said loudly. A startled note leaped into his voice: "Hullo! Hullo! Who let you aboard?"

A young woman was in front of him, talking with two men. She swung around. She was in man's attire, a trench-coat belted about her waist. She had removed a hat, and the masses of her richly golden hair betrayed her sex, though her face would have done so—a face of high angles and smooth golden skin, generous mouth, unsmiling blue eyes.

"You did," she rejoined, and extended a card. "Here, my ticket's endorsed by those higher up. My father, Franz Wetzler, had a heart attack. I'm his daughter Sigrid; I came at the last minute, in his place."

Macklin grunted a profane compliance. For an instant, Danroy's eyes met those of the girl; eyes like blue ice, inhuman eyes that sent a shiver into him. Yet she was a rarely beautiful creature. He was almost unaware of the dozen other persons about, all men.

"Well, sit down," snapped Macklin. "Who's got the grub? Let's have it."

The barge lurched heavily; they were already moving. Danroy set down his grip and took a chair; other grips and suitcases were piled in a corner. A hulking, huge man with curly yellow hair and a broken nose lurched up, swung a chair around, and joined them. By Macklin's introduction, this was Mr. Grauman, second officer.

Finding nothing to stimulate interest in Mr. Grauman except a strong whisky breath, Danroy inspected those around with unfeigned curiosity. The luggage, he noted with some astonishment, consisted of small bags only; there



was no heavy stuff. Also, most of the dozen men in the cabin were keeping a rather anxious eye on the luggage pile.

Four of the men, clumped together in low but animated talk, were undoubtedly Italian. The other eight did not seem to be foreign at all. They were speaking English; two, at his elbow, were speaking Bronx. They were well dressed. Glancing again at the pile of luggage, Danroy noted that it was of fine quality, most of it brand new.

At a touch on his knee, Danroy found Mr. Grauman leaning forward, winking at him.

"Sparklers, Mr. Danroy! Sparklers!" he breathed hoarsely. "Ever see so many at once?"

Sparklers? The girl's hand, adjusting her hair, threw a flame. Diamonds, of course. And diamonds glinted on the hands of the men or in their neckties. Middle-aged men, for the most part. One, who sat by himself, was a pleasant-faced young man of perhaps twenty-five, very well groomed.

Two huge parcels on the floor by themselves were opened, disclosing thermos bottles of coffee, paper cups and plates, and bundles of sandwiches. They were handed out freely, and Danroy, glancing at Macklin, saw the other watching him with a half smile that twisted his scarred face into sinister lines.

"Delicatessen! I'll lay you odds, Macklin! From the same delicatessen!"

"You lose," said Macklin, his smile widening. "Same smell, though. Got it figured out yet?"

"Not yet." Danroy bit into a sandwich and found it good. Grauman, at this moment, rose and lumbered off to get coffee. "You heard him, about the sparklers?"

Macklin nodded shortly. "I heard him. He's right. There's enough money and sparklers in this cabin to

buy out half the city of New York. That's one reason I wanted you as first officer. Tell you later."

Grauman came back, bearing a thermos, and Macklin shut up. Danroy munched at his sandwich and pondered the cryptic saying; it did not make sense to him, he decided.

It was soon to make plenty of sense.

DANROY made the most of the sandwiches and coffee. Then, lighting a cigarette, he rose, strolled to a window. Carefully, he put aside enough of the curtain to get a glimpse of darkness and slashing rain. As he turned, he found the young man at his side, with a request for a light. He provided matches.

"Are you one of us?" asked the young man frankly, a smile on his lips.

"Search me. I'm Cap'n Macklin's mate," replied Danroy, giving his name. The other put out his hand.

"Oh, I see! My name's Jim Ekhart. Cincinnati. Macklin said he had engaged a tough lot. You don't look so bad."

"Thanks." Danroy chuckled. Something about this young fellow, who seemed so young despite his years, appealed to him. "What do you mean, one of us? Are you one of us?"

"Technically, I suppose so." Ekhart smiled. "As a matter of fact, I'm just the family goat. In fact, I'd be in the Army now except for some heart trouble they imagined when they examined me. So I'm a bit out of my depth."

Danroy was puzzled. "Family goat? I don't savvy it at all."

"I'm the picked messenger of the family. You'll find a lot of Ekharts scattered around Ohio. Some spell it Eckhardt, some make it Eckhardt; me, I've cut it down to plain Ekhart. That didn't save me from the job, though."

"Wait," said Danroy, feeling that he was taking advantage of innocence. Absurd as it was, he could not help it. "Perhaps I ought to tell you that I'm completely in the dark about this game, except that it's something illegal."

Ekhart blinked at him. "What? You don't know?"

"Not a smidgen."

The young man swallowed hard and turned away. "Sorry," he said.

Danroy came back to his chair. Dinner or no dinner, he was conscious of a high tension in the air. Some of the men smoked, few talked; they looked nervous and strung up. The girl was combing her yellow hair; it was bobbed, yet was a glorious mass. She seemed quite calm and cool, thought Danroy; her high-angled features even looked cruel.

Young Ekhart was staring at her in open admiration.

"Young? He's no younger than I am. What's the matter with me?" thought Danroy with irritation. "Macklin's my kind; yet he's really not. He's a cold and murderous rat. I'm off balance. I'm not seeing things straight."

The cabin door opened and a man, glistening wet, looked in.

"Anyone that wants air can take the deck," he sang out. "Navy Yard's behind us and all safe. But no talkin' and not a light, not a smokel. You see to it, Cap'n Macklin."

"Aye," returned Macklin. He stooped and picked up the bundle he had carried; part of it was a slicker which he extended to Danroy. "Yes? Let's do. A spot of rain won't hurt."

Voices were yammering from all around, uncertain faces were blinking, demanding. Macklin stood up, donned his own slicker, and spoke back to them.

"You heard, gentlemen. Plenty of wet deck room outside; but no loud voices and no smoking. Any man who makes a light, out there, I'll kill him. . . . Ready, Mr. Danroy?"

Danroy was in his slicker. They stepped outside together. After a glimpse of that rain-wet deck, apparently no one else wanted air. They went to the rail together;

the lights of the barge and the tug and the other barge glimmered on the darkness. The rain had lessened, but closed in all horizons. Now and then the barge came down hard, but had little movement.

"Don't know what got into me, inside there," said Danroy. "My head's clear now; it was fuzzy before."

Macklin laughed softly. "The psychology of fear. Every person there was in stark terror except maybe the young chap Ekhart, and that girl. Blasted German womanhood, that's what she is! A female machine without a soul. By the way, you watch out for that Grauman! I had to take what I could get. He was mate on a Great Lakes boat; is wanted for murder in that region, rather brutal. Suspected of murdering a woman, too. He's the one to handle the men. You and I must handle him with an iron hand."

"Doesn't seem a bad sort."

"That kind will kill for the sheer fun of it. You'll see. What he doesn't understand will cow him. He's in terror, too. That cabin was acrawl with terror; I could feel it. Fear in the air like fog. Made me nervous, even."

A strange man, Macklin. Danroy could sense him again, now, as cold and deadly.

"Well," said Danroy easily, sucking at his empty pipe, "is there any reason why you shouldn't come across? You speak of fear and terror. True, perhaps, but why?"

"They're the pick of some three hundred thousand people in the United States who are in the same sort of jam," said Macklin. "These few largely represent the others, or those who have wealth. I will say the thing's been well organized. It's hopeless to try to get out of the country on any mass scale, and they know it. However, it's quite possible that by sitting quiet themselves, they can get a very few people smuggled out with a large proportion of the mass wealth."

Light dawned suddenly on Danroy's mind.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed. "Italians, Germans . . . Why, of course! So that's it!"

"Right. They're caught in the same sort of trap they or their people sprung on half Europe. Irony of fate, eh? Those people inside, and two or three others on the second barge, haven't much luggage, but it's compact . . . jewels, securities, cash. Each of these men represents a group of pooled resources. Uncounted millions in dollars."

Danroy's breath came sharply. Everything came into clear focus: Ekhart's words, the strained, tense atmosphere of fear, the riveted thought concentrated on that pile of luggage. The careful preparations.

"Our job is to run 'em out, eh?" he said. "But where? To a waiting German ship?"

Macklin laughed thinly. "Nothing so crude. The worst danger's past now. Everything's been beautifully arranged. Another two hours, and the scheme's as good as succeeded. We risk a spot of bad luck, nothing worse. But it's too bad that damned woman's aboard! That's something I hadn't figured on."

AS Danroy looked out at the rain-dimmed lights of Manhattan, his brain was busy for a moment with the ethical values of the situation. Undoubtedly it was his duty as an American citizen to turn in this whole outfit to the authorities; not so easy a thing as it might sound, at this stage of the game, unless he were eager to die a hero's death, which he was not.

On the other hand, he would probably have chances to do so in future; so thinking, he let the future take care of itself. He had stepped into this affair with his eyes open, and was taking money for his services; therefore he owed full service to those paying. Ethics and practical considerations were in sharp conflict, as usually is the case. A Government agent might have one clear course of action; he himself had another.

"Either way, I'm a heel," he reflected. He caught an almost inaudible laugh from the man beside him.



"An involved decision for any man with intelligence," said Macklin. For an instant Danroy was startled, then assured himself that he had not spoken aloud.

"What are you, a mind-reader?" he asked.

"No; it's not difficult to follow your line of thought. I had to face the same problem, and faced it. Only a scurvy rat tries to salve his conscience, Mr. Danroy, and foul the issue. A man looks it squarely in the eye and makes his decision, and takes his stand accordingly, for better or for worse; not unlike marriage, in fact. The owners have studied me thoroughly and tested me, and have found me a thoroughgoing rascal."

"I don't believe that for a minute," Danroy said impulsively. "Only a coward is a complete rascal."

Macklin was silent for an instant.

"And nobody is what he seems, Mr. Danroy. There's a mighty important thing to bear in mind, a thing that is completely forgotten in the American world of affairs. Face-value means nothing, in real life. No man is what he seems; and no woman either," Macklin added sourly.

The rain slanted down thinly. Waves slapped at the solid weight of the barge; she was heaving sluggishly.

"The prospect of being caught isn't pleasant," Danroy said slowly. "At that, I've not much to lose, except freedom. I've no family. The girl I was engaged to threw me over long ago and married a better future. I suppose you and I are the only souls in this outfit who aren't harried by the torment of fear."

"Wrong, Mr. Danroy. Speak for yourself alone. I've no fear of being caught. From that standpoint, we'll put the job through Bristol-fashion. But I have a more acute fear; a fear so dominating, so well-founded, that my hand's gripped on a pistol-butt this minute, ready to shoot any fool who lights a match. Fear that will cause me to strike to kill, at the least reason."

"Fear of what, then?"

"Thanks. I'll keep it to myself for the present. May be unjustified. If not, you'll share it soon enough."

"You're a queer chap. But we'll get on."

"I thought so from the start."

"Look here! Suppose we do put this thing over," said Danroy. "Suppose everything goes through without a hitch, whatever the ultimate scheme may be. What's to prevent your owners, as you call 'em, going from private finance to politics?"

"In what way?"

"If this scheme can smuggle out private funds, what's to prevent its smuggling out Nazi papers or Nazi spies? What's to prevent its being used as a definite weapon against the United States, to the damage of the country?"

"Nothing, in theory," said Macklin. "But I can assure you that it will not be done, if that will ease your mind."

"My mind be damned! Think of your own."

"I have already." Macklin's tone was curt, dry, abrupt, closing the discussion upon a cryptic note.

"Bristol-fashion"—another hint at definitely British origin. The man had probably been knocking about for some time on this side the water, so desperately hard up that he would jump at any chance for money. Danroy could appreciate the sensation.

"Fear, so well-founded—" And not fear of getting tripped up, either. What, then? That was a puzzler. Danroy could see nothing to be afraid of in this entire venture, except the possibility of getting caught in the act—assuredly enough to keep all hands on the anxious seat.

For the life of him, Danroy could not conjecture what course of action could lie ahead that would give these hyphenate Americans and their money the slightest chance of liberty. Transfer to another vessel, a sailing-vessel; well, then, what next? Whither could they go? Europe was barred. Patrols eyed the ocean from the air. A fast motor-cruiser might have some conceivable chance of evasion; a sailing-vessel, none whatever.

"Well, thanks for everything. I'm going to warm up. May be some coffee left." With this, Danroy turned to the deck-house.

He came back into the cabin, shed his slicker and slid into a chair, getting out pipe and pouch. The air was already blue with tobacco-smoke. Grauman sat with chin on chest, eyes closed, snoring heavily.

Somehow the place gave an air of reality to what Danroy had just learned. He understood now why the luggage was light, why few of these men were young, why the girl had replaced her father at the last minute. She was talking with Ekhart now. How well Macklin had hit her off in a phrase! A female machine without a soul. She talked with animation, but lacked the personal interest and intentness that Ekhart displayed; the machine was geared a trifle faster, that was all. German womanhood, yes, new style.

None of the others looked like a Nazi, and probably none was. Danroy eyed them critically as he smoked. All, even the four Italians, were indubitably prosperous business men. His mind ticketed them tentatively, half amusedly. The heavy-set man with the big lodge watch-charm dangling on his belly was probably a lawyer; he spoke with authority to those beside him. That strapping, good-looking man in tweeds, wearing a prominent "I Am An American" button, was probably a high-grade insurance man.

What futile imagining! Nobody was what he seemed; a good lesson to learn. Danroy smiled at his own thoughts. They all looked painfully ill at ease, fish out of water; they were at sea, physically and mentally. No cool, competent efficiency among them . . . except possibly the Wetzler girl. Sigrid; good name for her.

The barge was rocking a little more, not enough for anyone to notice; getting the open swell now, thought Danroy. Ekhart and the girl were speaking of him, darting furtive glances at him. He smiled and nodded to them, coolly, and Ekhart flushed a little, as though detected in something underhand.

WHEN the door opened, everyone started; a wave of alarm ran around. It was only Macklin coming in, reseating himself beside Danroy. He, too, pulled out a pipe and stuffed it.

"Harbor patrol boat just came along," he said under his breath. "Exchanged a hail with the tugmen and went her way." He raised his pipe and lifted his voice, to attract general attention. "Take it easy, gentlemen. Everything's going very nicely. Still raining outside and getting thicker."

Everyone began to speak at once, showering questions on him. Macklin smiled, answered one and another, seemed perfectly composed and at ease. His manner lessened the strain. The man in tweeds came over, bit at a cigar, and spoke.

"The air's terrible in here. Think I'll step out."

"Not with that cigar lighted," Macklin said. "Mr. Wagner, shake hands with my first officer, Mr. Danroy. Feeling homesick for St. Louis?"

"Yes," said Wagner, and shook hands cordially. Not an insurance man at all, it appeared; he was a machinery salesman, and tops in his line. He had recently returned from Mexico and South America, a business trip. He pocketed his cigar and moved to the open air.

"I don't think we have any California representative aboard," said Macklin. "Except you. That place you're from—inland, you say?"

Danroy nodded. "Visalia, yes. Alongside the High Sierras."

"Never been there." Macklin sighed perceptibly. "So many places I've never been, and wanted to see! Too late now, I fancy—"

The voices of the four Italians suddenly rose to a pitch of excited passion. One leaped to his feet. So did the others. Gesticulation, furious speech—one of them slid a hand under his coat-arm.

Like a flash, Macklin was out of his chair and among them in one leap. His teeth bared in a snarl, his eyes glittering, he swept a big service automatic from man to man. His voice crackled and burned with electric force.

"You blasted fools! Want me to kill the lot of you? Hands up, there—up! That's right. I'll take your guns. Tomorrow you can kill one another and nobody will interfere; but right now I'll do all the killing that's done. You can have your guns tomorrow."

From two of them, he took an automatic pistol each, came back to his chair, and gave the guns to Danroy. The four Italians looked at him in paralyzed terror; that explosion of cold, deadly rage had vitiated their own anger, giving them a common and acute fear of him. They sat down again, looked at one another, exchanged sheepish smiles, and went on talking.

The Wetzler girl was regarding Macklin steadily. For the first time, Danroy caught a flicker of human feeling in her golden features.

"You've started something," said Danroy, amused. "She's got her eye on you. Likes your style, I'd say."

Macklin swore, heartily and not under his breath either, but made no comment.

Time passed. The heavy barge bumped and wallowed through the seas until, for very boredom, the tension

began to gather anew. Danroy was dozing when three choppy toots from the tug brought him up, wide awake.

Macklin rose, catching up his slicker.

"That's for us. Better come along."

Danroy was on his feet instantly, with vivid relief and curiosity tugging at him. They passed out into the rain, which had thickened, slashing along on the wings of a brisk breeze; Danroy felt the water trickle down his neck inside the slicker. Voices were bawling across the water, but the tug used no searchlight.

"They'll handle everything," said Macklin, as though to reassure him. "Nice work; prompt to the minute."

Red and green winked out of the dark. Some craft was there, bow on, Danroy realized; then only the green showed, and the masthead light like a lost star in the rain. Wonderful luck that no sea was running. Macklin observed. A voice hailed him from the tug, and he made answer.

"Everything's jake," came the response. "Two boats working. They'll have lights; keep all doused. Your crowd will go first. Get 'em ready. Boats coming now."

"Aye-aye," rejoined Macklin, and gripped Danroy's arm.

"I'll take Grauman along with me. You stay till the last. No hurry, no confusion, no delay, no lights. Here's a ladder rigged; no grating below, so warn 'em. Obey the boatmen. It's their job, mind, till we take over the *Alceste*. Go ahead, rout 'em out. Single file."

Danroy reentered the cabin.

"Line up single file. No hurry, take your luggage," he said calmly. "No lights; we'll direct you as you come. And no crowding. All right, Miss Wetzler. You come along first."

She flashed him a look almost of scorn, as though recoiling from woman's prerogative. However, she came to the door and picked up one of the bags there. The others began to jam forward. Grauman, at a word from Danroy, pushed past and went on to join Macklin.

"Pass back the word," Danroy said to the girl, as he watched the line form behind her, "that there's no grating under the ladder; the boat will have lights. All's quite safe."

She complied. Voices and faces were eager, excited, jubilant; tension was gone.

Danroy led her out into the wet night, and to the ladder. Nice work, he thought; the boat was below, two men with boathooks holding on. They were in the lee of the barge, and no sea was running anyway; it was quite simple. A flashlight from the boat glimmered intermittently on the ladder. Macklin and Grauman were already down.

"Go ahead, miss," said Danroy.

SHE went; it was steady enough for a one-hand descent. No faltering; a regular athlete, Danroy noted. Indeed, she went down far better than the men behind. They made a job of it, whining, growling, cursing. One of them slipped halfway down, lost his grip, and fell. The light went out. A laugh from below followed the crash, a startled, alarmed voice broke out, then became silent. All well.

Danroy darted back to the cabin. Empty; everyone out. He followed, the last to go down. The boat was not the first, but another. It pushed out, oars dipped, and they were away.

With a dim light to guide, they came in under a ship's lee. Here was a different matter; a hanging Jacob's ladder. From above came a voice:

"Here's a line. Send up your duffel, one piece at a time, while you're climbing. And shake a leg. We've got no idea to wait all night."

"Idear!" Danroy chuckled; that was Boston speaking. No mistaking it. A Yankee, one at least, up above. He wondered what was going to become of this Yankee crew. The wind sang in unseen rigging overhead, canvas slatted.

For some reason a man aboard the tug was cursing; his blasphemous oaths came faintly but distinctly.

Good riddance, thought Danroy. Good riddance to all that! The smell of the ship above was sweet and clean, the smell of new-cut pine, of sawed lumber. Good riddance to trucks and New York and the land and everybody on it.

Then it was his turn, and he was clawing his way up the dangling ladder.

DANROY was over the rail and on a dark deck. Before he could make out anything, he heard a voice somewhere close by, a voice whose concentrated ferocity made him shiver.

"Give me that flask." Something splashed overboard. "Now, you rat! Want me to cut your throat in the dark? I'll do it, so help me, if you swig another drink! Sober up; take *that* to do it on, and *that*!" A thud—another—and the sound of a man's groan. "See to the men when they come aboard, or I'll give you some more of the same! Sling 'em down for'ard like the rats they are. Set the able ones to sluicing down the drunks. You'd better have things shipshape or I'll kill you before the dawn comes up! —Mr. Danroy! Where are you, Mr. Danroy?"

With a start, Danroy realized that it had been Macklin dealing with Mr. Grauman.

"Here," he answered.

The voice grated at him: "Mind your manners; I'm master here, blast you!"

"Aye, sir," rejoined Danroy.

"Come below, aft, and quick about it."

Danroy responded and stumbled aft, cursing as he groped his way. A schooner, he now realized, heavy spars swaying overhead, a deck-load of lumber blocking passage. A dim glow of light aided him. He descended a companionway and glimpsed Ekhart and the other passengers crammed into cabins, looking hopeless and blank and dismayed. He followed Macklin into another cabin where, with hooded ports, a shaggy man sat at a table, a grim, gaunt man.

"Cap'n Hurst," said Macklin, "my mate, Mr. Danroy. Sit, Mister."

"Not much time to gam," said Hurst, merely nodding to Danroy. "We'll be off as soon as the boats come back with your men. They're extra boats. Leaving you three; should be ample. Papers,"—he laid hand on a black tin box,—"*all* here. Rough log written up to eight bells, midnight. Questions?"

"Any trouble?" asked Macklin.

"None. Cleared from Rockport, Maine, for Martinique with lumber. No questions, no hitches; clean as a whistle. Cabin stores as ordered. What about our money?"

"The minute you step ashore," Macklin produced a document and fountain pen, scrawled his name, and presented it. "There y'are."

The other examined the paper, nodded, and pocketed it. "Ample space to stow passengers left in the after hold, atop the lumber," he said gravely. "If anything goes wrong, we're in the soup, all of us; paid accordin', too."

"Nothing will go wrong," said Macklin confidently. "Even if a cursory examination is made, we'll slip past, using your names and so forth."

"If they get down to bedrock, you're a goner."

"That's the risk we take. And, Hurst! You'll be informed ashore of arrangements made; you and your men must not show up at home, naturally. You're to go to Charleston. The schooner will clear for there from Fort-de-France, to take you back aboard."

Hurst nodded. "Understood. My men are safe; all Maine or Boston men. Better not waste time. You're off course now. Accounted for in the log. Good luck."

He shook hands with Macklin, nodded again to Danroy, and stamped out. From the deck came the sounds of trampling feet, heavy curses, and the voice of Grauman.



"He's done it!" she exclaimed. "He said he would!"

"Funny what a man will do for money," said Macklin. He looked trim, alert, dangerous. "Same as us. We'd better take hold. I'll help with Grauman's watch; that'll let each of us keep an eye open all the time. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

Macklin's thin lips curved in his twisted grin.

"It'll be hell for a day or two. Sick passengers and hands. We want to be well away from here with sunrise; too bad the wind's light. Tell those lubbers to pack themselves in as they see fit. You and I must share a cabin. Well, let's face it. I'll take the first watch with Grauman. Almost eight bells now."

Almost midnight! Danroy was astonished.

He went into the passage, delivered his message to the hapless passengers, ignored their clamorings about accommodations, and went on deck.

Here was chaos—men and duffel-bags everywhere. Grauman hammering two recalcitrant drunks, voices bawling. Off astern the lights of the tug showed, then were gone.

Out of this chaos, Macklin brought order so deftly, so swiftly, that Danroy was newly amazed. The skipper was a human dynamo. In no time at all he had Grauman at



work, had Danroy at work, had everyone at work. He knew the names of the men he had shipped, and called them off into watches. The lines were handed, the canvas lifted and filled, the *Alceste* leaned over and began to slip through the water.

Danroy was dismissed, with his watch. He went below, found the cubbyhole where his own bag and that of Macklin lay, and tumbled in, wet clothes and all. The place was hardly large enough for the two berths. The passengers must be badly crowded, he thought; he could imagine them trying to fit in, each one desperately hanging on to his treasure. . . . He was asleep, before he knew it.

Eight bells, four in the morning. Someone shook him up. He got on deck, into a gray dawn and a chill haze and a breeze out of the northwest that was lifting the *Alceste* on her way nicely. Grauman gave him the course and lumbered away to sleep.

To be an Annapolis man presupposes a better acquaintance with social usages than with sailing-ships; Danroy was taciturn that morning, desperately brushing up old knowledge and searching for new, keeping his efforts to himself. By the time the sun rose, he had his feet firmly planted, at least. Luckily, he was immune to seasickness; but if he was, others were not. The old two-masted schooner took the seas with a groaning stagger and lurch that soon had half the men and all the passengers lining the lee rail.

The day came up clear and fine. A grizzled old man with one eye and a heavy limp came to take his trick at the helm. He touched his cap to Danroy, repeated the course, took over the spokes and tested them, and cocked his one eye aloft.

"What's your name?" asked Danroy, sensing that the man knew his business.

"Reilly, sir. Might I have a word?"

"A dozen if you like."

Reilly jerked his head at the lumber piles forward. "Them deckload lashings are loose, sir; stretched with the rain, mebber. If you'll tell Sorenson to take care of it—he's the only sailor in the lot. He'll see to it. That's him shakin' up them two drunks on the sta'board deck pile."

"Any quartermaster aboard?"

"Lord, sir! Aint been thought of."

Danroy went forward. Sorenson was a little man but powerful, with as evil a face as ever Danroy had seen.

"You're quartermaster for this watch, Sorenson," said Danroy. "Tighten up the deckload lashings and set the men to work swabbing down as much of the deck as is free."

"Aye, sir," replied the other, and loosed a bellow at his comrades. Danroy returned to the wheel and Reilly cackled a wheezy laugh.

"I know Annapolis when I see it, sir! Served two tricks in the old Navy, I did, back in Spanish-American war times. Never seen a worse crowd for'ard than this. Liquor in the forepeak and dope, too. And that man Leary aint what he claims. Stir bird, he is."

Danroy nodded. "Thanks, Reilly. I'll save it for Cap'n Macklin's ear."

Martinique! Fort-de-France! The memory of those words came back to him, as he watched the wallowing seas roll past, with added impact. Those words hung in his mind; they dominated all else, they made things clear as day. Not everything; they did not explain the mysteriously acute fears of Captain Macklin. But for the rest—

Martinique was, of course, Vichy French, and up and down the eastern littoral trade with Martinique was being resumed. Yet Vichy French meant Berlin, in this day of queerly complex history.

Once this baker's dozen of the Nazi breed set foot ashore at Fort-de-France, they were safe with their money and jewels and securities and what-not. They might stay there, they might go farther, but their objective would be attained. In case of danger from Navy or Coast-Guard patrols, they would be hidden atop the lumber in the hold. An unlikely contingency, for a tiny lumber schooner would attract small attention or interest.

Macklin appeared, to take over the deck with Grauman, and when watches had been changed he beckoned Danroy below with him for a bite of breakfast. The steward who served them was, for a wonder, a Filipino boy and brisk at his job.

"Where'd you pick up Luis?" Danroy asked.

"The police wanted him; they called it murder," said the skipper laconically.

"You seem chock-a-block with killers, aboard here!"

"A man has to be in a tight spot to take long chances," said Macklin. "Luis is good, old Reilly is good, Sorenson is good. What d'ye think of the rest?"

"My opinion wouldn't go through the mails. Reilly tipped me off that one of them, Leary, is an ex-convict. I haven't seen him."

"He's in my watch, or rather Grauman's. He's bad, and he has brains. I suppose you've figured out the lay of things by this time?"

Danroy assented. "More or less. I don't see what you're so afraid of."

"You will. It's coming, sure as fate. I'll tip you off in time, unless you wake up to it; don't want to make you jittery without reason. Keep your eyes open. I've got our passengers bedded down; they're a ruddy mess." Macklin grimaced. "Not a man in the lot except young Ekhart and that strapping Amazon. They're soft, pulpy, chicken-hearted."

"Who's taking care of their valuable freight?"

"Not me. We're not responsible. They've tucked it all away. The cook is another of these Filipinos, named Ramon. He and Luis are wanted for the same killing, a nasty one."

"Weren't particular who you shipped, eh?" said Danroy. "I'd have shipped Satan himself, if he'd applied."

Before turning in, Danroy glanced at the passengers. They were a futile lot, crowded in misery. Wagner, the machinery salesman from St. Louis, was on deck with Sigrid Wetzler; the girl's statuette charms were rendered more suggestive by her man's attire, because less hidden. She had discarded hat and raincoat, and wore an air of scornful contempt toward all the world.

"A stream of water from a firehose would do her good, or a kick in the pants," reflected Danroy.

Twice, during the day, patrol planes circled high above the vessel and went their way. Danroy encountered no trouble with the crew, but he was appalled when a sudden blow that afternoon brought all hands to tend the lines. A more shiftless, vicious lot of men he had seldom seen. Most of the sixteen souls forward were supremely ignorant of the sea. They were driven to their work by Grauman and Sorenson. Knives were bared and fury rose high, with a consequent brutality that enforced discipline but boded ill for the future.

That day, Danroy got his first look at the man Leary. Young Ekhart, deathly white and weak, had struggled on deck with Sigrid assisting him, and stretched out on the deckload in the warm sunlight.

Danroy, coming topside after computing his noon observation, saw the girl lose balance to a sudden dip of the schooner. She lurched and slid toward the lee bulwarks; Ekhart came to his feet, trying to catch her, only to be flung against her. They went rolling together in the scuppers. Leary swooped upon them, laughing, caught the girl in his arms, and lifted her erect. He held her, for an instant; he was a lithe, crop-headed man with a bold intelligence in his features, blurred by a reddish stubble of beard.

Just what happened, Danroy did not know. The girl struck him across the face, and struck him hard. Leary laughed heartily and picked up Ekhart, and helped him to the deckload again. That was all; but the man's laughter, his bold gaze, his tigerish grace of movement, left Danroy with a queer, indefinable impression. He understood why Macklin had shipped the man, yet accounted him dangerous.

SUNSET brought promise of better things, the wind dropping to a light, steady northwest breeze. With morning the *Alceste* was slipping gently along, almost on an even keel, with scarcely any sea running; a regular blasted yachting party, old one-eyed Reilly called it. Seasickness passed, the decks were crowded with basking figures, and the wan passengers became almost cheerful. The Aryans were not getting much fun out of their boat-ride, thought Danroy.

Without warning, Macklin summoned his two officers and raided the forepeak that afternoon, making a thorough search. The man Leary objected violently; Macklin knocked him cold and twitching. The net result was a choice collection of weapons ranging from brass knuckles to an ugly little "suicide gun."

"So you've drawn their teeth," observed Danroy, later. He and Macklin stood together at the rail in the darkness, taking star-sights. Macklin grunted.

"Finally dropped on to it, have you?" he rejoined caustically. "Sixteen men on the dead man's chest! It's a volcano, no less! And they have their knives, all of 'em."

He went below without further comment, but Danroy, bracing to the heave of the deck, felt a thrill of comprehension and wondered that he could have been so blind.

Wealth aboard, countless oodles of it, in the possession of a few soft, plump, inefficient men evading the law;

wealth that might be had for the taking and no, come-back, no questions asked. A crew of thugs and murderers to do the taking. Well! No wonder Cap'n Macklin had a case of nerves!

And further, Danroy realized, was the presence of Sigrid Wetzler. A girl alone, a woman burgeoning with youth and sex; a spark sufficient to touch off this volcano of men's passions into roaring eruption.

Such was Danroy's first startled train of thought. It simmered down into less alarming proportions, however, under the reflection that the men forward knew nothing of what these passengers carried, and the secret was not at all likely to leak out. A calming reflection indeed, and borne out by the facts.

THE days slipped past on errant wing, until the Gulf Stream enfolded them with balmy warmth, with baffling winds and currents, trickily sudden changes of weather. Navigating a windjammer here was a headache. Squalls came out of nowhere without reason; the canvas must be trimmed continuously, and the cursing hands were kept hard at it.

The passengers, gaining their sea-legs, were everywhere about the decks. They avoided the crew, and the crew avoided them, doubly enough. The four Italians kept in company. Wagner and Ekhart and Sigrid remained much together, both men obvious admirers of the stalwart young woman. Her attitude remained one of scornful aloofness, although she did try to organize games, without much success. Men driven by anxiety about wealth and safety gave small thought to games.

Nowhere arose any cause for uneasiness. Grauman handled his watch brutally, but Danroy never touched a man; his authority was recognized at sight. Any fear of pursuit or apprehension had long since passed. The more pronouncedly German among the passengers grew openly cocky, verging upon insolence; here and there the Nazi salute was to be seen, and war talk mounted high—war talk in more ways than one, as it proved.

"Nice humdrum voyage after all," Danroy said, finding himself alone with Macklin at the mess table one morning. "Got over your worries?"

"So-so," vouchsafed the other warily. "No more danger of being searched, anyhow; we've turned the main trick very well."

"You should look more cheerful," Danroy rejoined.

Macklin was morose, it was true. He had kept to himself, spoken in curt words, and displayed an almost savage surliness. Danroy had no doubt that the man was preyed upon by a deep inward stress of emotion, which vented itself in action during times of crisis, but otherwise remained an increasingly bitter weight.

"Cheerful? Me?" Macklin fairly snarled. "Come up topside. I want a word in private. What's this about a sick itey?"

"That scrawny Italian with the big mustache, Rossi," replied Danroy. "I looked at him; he's running a fever. Stuffed himself on sausage yesterday. I gave him some nitre and some of those cow-pills in the medicine chest." Macklin nodded and rose. "Got to clear him up. Can't have any trouble with pratique when we make Fort-France."

"Will there be any questions asked when we show up there with passengers?"

"Not likely, the way this show is being handled!"

They went to the deck together. At the rail, behind one of the deck piles, Macklin lighted his pipe, glanced around, and transfixed Danroy with his alert gaze.

"How honest are you?"

"That depends. Not particularly honest, I guess."

"I need money; I need it like all hell." Macklin bit off his words as though they burned him. He was voicing something that had lingered deep within him. "Has it struck you what damned blighted fools we'd be, to let

these blasted Huns clear out with their loot? Has it struck you that this is enemy money, and it's ours for the taking? We could strip this crowd to the last sou, and laugh at 'em forever after, by the Lord!"

Danroy felt his pulses jump.

"Aye. We could," he replied almost mechanically.

Then he went on speaking, reflectively.

"I expect you need money, not for yourself, but for others; it drives you. Yes, we could do this little job, Macklin. Neatly and cleanly, not the way it'd be done if this crew of ours did it. But I don't think we will."

Macklin's eyes held the tortured flames of hell.

"Eh? Why not?"

"For the same reason you'd not make the decision yourself but are putting it up to me. Because our self-respect, regardless of what we are in the world's eyes, is involved. We've taken this work and we'll see it through. Or—will we?"

Macklin looked away, his lean dark face saturnine.

"I suppose so, damn you," he said in a low voice. "But my mind plays with it all. Those bastards with their dirty money, and what it'd mean—"

"Maybe it would, maybe it wouldn't," broke in Danroy, smiling. "There'd likely be a curse on it. So let's forget the mess and have a look at Rossi, eh?"

Macklin assented gloomily; yet he seemed rid of a weight. They went down to the cabins.

Rossi was wedged in a lower berth, a cleared breakfast-tray on the deck, a half-open briefcase behind him. He gave Danroy a grimace and a smile.

"Your medicine pretty near kill me, but I feel fine," he said. "No fever."

"You fool, shut that briefcase!" snapped Macklin, and suited action to words. "Was it there when that boy brought in your tray?"

"Maybe. I don't know," said Rossi, shrugging. "My money, it is safe."

"Safe—and showing! Use your head," barked Macklin profanely. On deck, he shook his head at Danroy. "The blasted ass! Let's hope Luis didn't catch sight of the greenbacks."

Danroy smiled again. Cap'n Macklin had forgotten the gnaw and sting of his own inward fury. The incident was closed, at least for the moment. . . .

What with light airs and the contrary bearing of the Stream, they made little gain that day, but evening brought a freshening wind that sent the schooner surging through the water with everything drawing well.

Danroy took the deck at midnight. Old Reilly came limping aft to take his trick at the wheel; the ship's bell clanged out the four double strokes, the course was given and repeated, the change of watches accomplished. Faint whitish glimmers of phosphorescence twirled in the wake of the schooner, the stars burned high and clear, the deck rose, surged with a roll and go, and fell again under their feet.

"Looks like a fallin' glass, sir," said old Reilly.

"Eh?" Danroy turned to him. "No, it's not falling. But keep your eye peeled. No telling when a squall will come out of the stars, hereabouts."

"No, sir. I mean the fo'c'sle, sir."

"What's wrong up for'ard?"

"I don't rightly know, Mr. Danroy. A lot o' talking in corners; it allus means trouble, on shipboard. A woman aboard is bad luck, too."

"They're talking about the young woman, you mean?"

"Oh, that's all open and aboveboard, sir; you know how men are. It don't matter what them scum say aloud. That Sorenson, he's a sailor all right, but he's a bad egg too. Him and Leary are gettin' thick. And Pappas, that there Greek feller with the broken nose, he's lined up for trouble. He's in the other watch, sir."

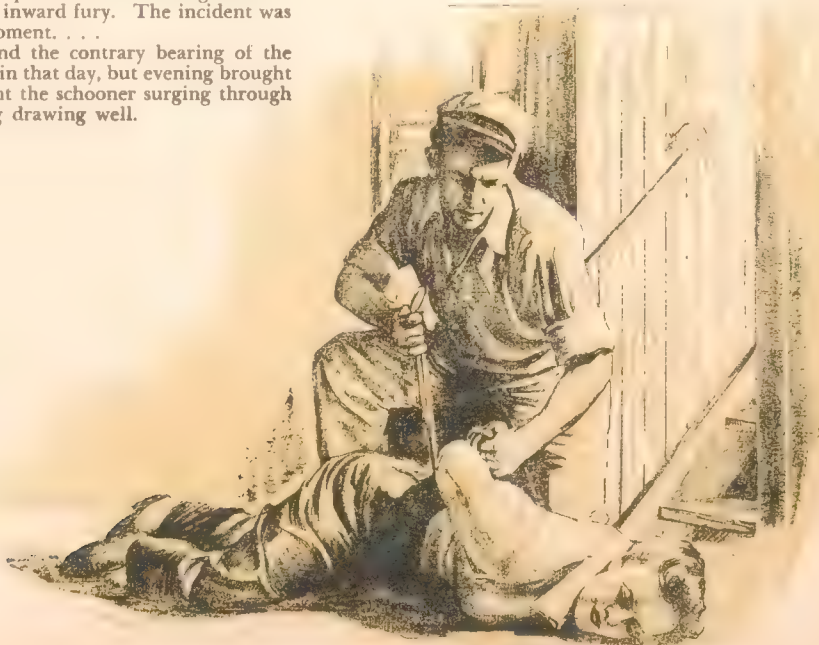
"What's wrong with him, aside from being a punch-drunk wrestler?"

"Them four Italians we got aboard, sir, and them Germans. This Pappas, he lost some of his folks in the war on the other side; he don't like these folks bragging around. He aint got much sense, but it don't take sense to use a knife."

"Or get punished for it."

"If it comes to that, sir, how about passengers? I was for'ard shining up the bell today, and that pleasant-spoken young gent, he was havin' it hot and heavy with that fat old sausage, the one that wears a big watch-chain over his belly. And I mean hot, sir. The young lady, she stopped 'em, but things had been said."

So Ekhart and the fat lawyer, Linton, were no friends, eh? Perhaps Ekhart was not a Nazi at all; he had inti-



*She lay inert. . . .
He went about
the business of
making her se-
cure. He worked
fast.*

mated as much. Danroy made no comment, and Reilly said no more. That he had said anything was in itself significant. Leary and Sorenson would make a bad team if any trouble were started.

None was started. The dawn smiled, the wind held, laughter rushed down upon the day; clumsy half-brained Pappas fell overboard in pulling a bucket of water, and was picked up safely but roaring his terror to the skies, so that mirth abounded. And, laughter being an emotion that dispels other emotions, Danroy forgot all about Reilly's veiled warnings. He turned in and slept like a top. Just as well that he did, perhaps.

A ROLL of the schooner awakened him. A roll! He sprang from his berth and looked out at the sea. It was getting on toward noon. The wind was gone completely; the sea was a mass of molten, rolling metal. The schooner was rocking slowly, steadily, with slatting of hemp and groan of timbers. She had run into a flat calm, that might last an hour or a day, in these waters. And the sun was hot.

He looked again. Here and there cat's-paws were darkening the glassy surface. This did not mean wind was coming up; it meant only puffs. He heard Macklin's voice from the deck above, and the thudding tramp of barefoot men. The canvas was being taken in, lest one of those puffs be a squall, as was likely enough. Satisfied, he turned away, slid into jacket and trousers, and stepped out into the passage. Silly to wear his jacket, perhaps. . . .

He almost fell over Sigrid Wetzler. His first thought was that she must be having a fit. Her mouth was wide open, her eyes were bulging; she was gripped by spasmodic terror. She clutched at him with frantic hands, trying to say something.

"It's all right, take it easy," said Danroy in sharp alarm. "Wait till I get a shirt instead of this jacket!"

An inarticulate, gasping cry burst from her.

"He's done it, he's done it!" she exclaimed jerkily. "He said he would! And now Wagner's gone after him!"

Down the companionway pierced a voice, the voice of Macklin in sharp urgency.

"Mr. Danroy! Mr. Danroy! For God's sake!"

That was all. Nothing else; it was unfinished. Danroy tried to tear loose from the girl's grip. She clutched him more tightly.

"Here! He's in here!" she cried, dragging at him. "You must come!"

"Let go, confound you!" Danroy slid up his hands inside her arms, knocked them wide and freed himself. Thought of Macklin's voice and words burned at him. He leaped at the ladder in frantic haste.

He gained the deck and halted in blank bewilderment. Nothing was happening. The after deck, abaft the piles of lashed lumber, was vacant. The reefed canvas was listless, the helm was deserted, lanyards holding the spokes. It was incredible, this hot empty glare of deck and sea. . . .

Voices reached him from the forward deck, beyond the stacked lumber; savage, growling voices. He caught a blur of movement there and started forward. Suddenly every nerve in him jumped; a faint cry reached him, so instinct with appeal and horror and frightful terror that it pierced like a white-hot needle. It came not from the deck but from the sea.

Glancing about, he heard the faint cry again. He saw something breaking the glassy surface of the water, far astern. Something tossed there and, as he looked, was gone from sight in a swirl. Horrific fingers pricked at him.

It was not five seconds since he reached the deck, and yet time had dissolved. This empty deck, that fearful, heart-hurried appeal from Macklin; the paralyzed shock of the girl below, still unexplained, and now the death-cry from the water and that vanished struggling shape—these things filled his mind, all in the split fraction of a second. A score of possibilities rushed across his brain, even as he

put out his foot to move. For an instant sidereal time was no more; he was in a universe of orthic values, of space and time that comprehended all things in a flash. . . .

Another burst of those bestial growls came from the forward deck and awakened him. He was on the run, darting between the piled deckloads, only to reach a plunging stop at sight of what lay beyond. The revelation came with bullet impact, then time again burst loose from its bounds in staggering unreality.

Nothing was happening; everything was happening, as in a slow-motion picture. A mass of men, it seemed everyone aboard, was crowded solidly at the forward end of the deckload, at the starboard rail. They seemed queerly motionless, until Danroy perceived that, amid this crowd and at its heart, men were indeed in motion, in deadly motion. The face of Ekhart caught his eye, smeared with blood. Ekhart, naked to the waist, was grappled with the machinery man, Wagner. Not in tweeds now but in pajamas, Wagner was slashing at Ekhart with a slungshot, slashing in savage fury.

This was not all. A general precipitation of passions seemed to have taken place; malign festerings had come to a head here, all unexpectedly. Rossi, the lean Italian with the big mustache, lay on the deck and on top of him was the clumsy Greek, Pappas, choking him horribly; the man's tongue protruded in the death-agony.

In this fleeting but enormously protracted instant, Danroy realized that there was no sign of Macklin anywhere. The whole scene was incredible, monstrous, impossible. That cry from the water, that vanishing shape . . . had that been Macklin? No, not Macklin's voice. Here was Sorenson, grinning evilly; here was Leary, leaning forward, intent upon the struggle. Here was little brown Luis, a knife in his hand, sliding in to jab at the stalwart figure of Wagner.

The spell broke. A puff of wind struck the schooner from the port quarter; she rolled slowly and steadily over to starboard, then back, with a slatting and bang of canvas and rigging. The mass of men surged, burst into movement as they were flung off balance. The Filipino's knife dripped red; from Wagner broke a cry of stricken agony. Another cry jerked at Danroy—the voice of old one-eyed Reilly, kneeling over something in the port scuppers.

"Mr. Danroy! Look out—it's mutiny!"

TOO late! Danroy had been seen—and mutiny was a mild word for it. The mass of men flowed at him with a yell. Leary and Sorenson and Luis headed them. They came in a compact knot, knives bared, curses and fury on their lips. And they came fast.

Once again, time seemed to hesitate and stop. Past them as they came, Danroy was aware of Pappas lumbering grotesquely erect, bringing Rossi with him, thrusting the body of the Italian over the rail. Wagner was gone. Others had put him over, too, but his slungshot had reached Ekhart, who lay senseless in the scuppers. A number of men there were squabbling over packets of currency that spilled from an open briefcase.

All this in another flash, as Danroy's hand twitched at his jacket pocket. What was it the man had said, in that waterfront shop in the dead-end street? The spring and the release, yes; his fingers fumbled with the spring. His eyes were fixed on the wild faces leaping for him, faces ablaze with blood-passion and murder.

The nearest of them was not six feet away when Danroy's thumb pressed the release. There was a hissing, spurring jet of vapor. It spread fanwise, enveloping the whole mass of men and rolling on beyond them. Danroy backed away swiftly, and well he did.

Through the horrible gasping strangling yell that arose, Luis the steward hurtled in a blind agonized convulsion, leaping bodily for the spot where Danroy had stood, his reddened knife stabbing. He met only vacancy, struck the lumber pile headfirst, and collapsed. Leary flung his arms

about his face and went rolling along the deck. Sorenson charged on like a bull, rammed the lumber pile, and veered off forward, grappling the air and roaring choked curses. The other men disintegrated; some went to the deck, others fled, clawing at their eyes.

Danroy backed and backed, himself afraid of that invisible but potent fume he had released. A puff of vagrant breeze brought him a faint whiff of it; he coughed, and backed again. The schooner heeled slowly and soggly under the thrust of the wind-puff. Danroy found himself almost beside old Reilly, in the port scuppers.

"Gawd, sir! That was beautiful!" exclaimed the awed Reilly. "But here, sir—gimme a hand with the Cap'n. He's got it bad."

DANROY turned and looked down. Reilly crouched above the figure of Macklin, a figure seeming strangely small and shrunken, as it lay crumpled against rail and deckload. Macklin was stripped to the waist and Reilly had applied an efficient-looking bandage under the left arm, but it was soaking through with blood.

"What happened?" asked Danroy, to gain time. He was still stunned and bewildered.

"It was him started it," Reilly pointed across the deck to the prostrate Ekhart. "He come charging on deck with that other gent after him, and all jabbering German, sir. Then the lid just blew off. Leary, he grabbed someone and chucked him overside, knocked him slap over with one hook. The Cap'n yelled for you, but the cook showed up with a knife and give him this, and all hell bust loose. That Greek, he's plumb nuts."

Danroy thought of the girl's words. There had been trouble below: Ekhart had done something down there. . . .

"I dunno how many of 'em were done for, sir," Reilly was saying. "Everybody was yelling about money and di'monds for the taking."

Danroy's gaze swept the after deck. He realized suddenly that none of the passengers were visible. A chill hand finched his spine.

"Good God!" he exclaimed.

"You done it beautiful, sir," said Reilly. "Tear-gas, huh? I've seen it before this."

"We'll have to get the skipper below," Danroy stooped, suddenly competent and alert. "You take his feet. I'll lift his shoulders; careful, now. We'll get him in a berth. Sure he's not dead? He looks it."

"Not him, sir, but it's bad," said Reilly. "If you can spare me, sir, I might work a bit over him, compresses and the like. I've had a bit of surgical experience."

"Very well, do what you can."

They lifted, with care. Suddenly Reilly looked around; startled terror leaped in his seamed old face. He let the feet of Macklin thump down against the deck.

"Look out! It's him! Clear nuts!"

Pappas was coming toward them, his gaze fixed on Danroy. He coughed, but came on; the gas had dissipated by this time. Danroy set down his burden and straightened.

"You, Pappas!" bit out his voice. "Get aft to the helm—quick about it!"

"The hell with you! I'll wring your damned neck!" panted the Greek. A torrent of oaths spouted from him.

"Take this, sir! Quick!" bleated Reilly. "He didn't have no chance to use it."

Reilly had wrested something from the hip pocket of Macklin. Danroy took it, his fingers curling about the butt; a heavy automatic pistol. Pappas, head lowered, was coming on, foaming threats; behind him slipped a slither figure—that of the Filipino cook, Ramon. He too was a madman, jabbering wild words; it was he who had knifed Macklin, and the knife in his hand threw sun-glitters into Danroy's eyes. Others of the dispersed men were yelling encouragement at Pappas, and flinging oaths at Reilly.

Danroy threw off the safety-catch of the pistol, jerked it up, and fired twice. . . .

Bringing Macklin down the ladder, Danroy saw the strapping Sigrid standing in the passage. She had conquered her paroxysm of terror; now she was white enough, but quite in command of herself. The usual scornful gleam was gone from her blue eyes, however. Clinging to Macklin with one hand, Danroy extended the pistol to her. She took it.

"No time yet to talk," he said crisply. "Go on deck; you'll find Ekhart lying up for'ard. If he's not dead, revive him. Also that steward, Luis. Throw his knife over the rail and kick him alive and send him down here. Then keep all hands for'ard until I come topside. Understand?"

"Of course," she said, and went up the ladder. No fear in her now.

They lifted Macklin into a berth; no lack of empty cabins. Danroy touched old Reilly's shoulder.

"You can do more here than on deck. Bring him around if you can."

He sought out Macklin's duffel and searched through it. As he hoped, he found another heavy pistol and some spare clips of cartridges. Among his own things, he found the spare cartridges for his gas gun, and reloaded this. It had served well when most needed.

He went to the other cabins and looked in. The three Italians were huddled together in one, scared stiff; they goggled at him with bulging eyes, but said nothing, did not move. They seemed petrified. None of them was young; none was very old.

The other cabins were empty, except one. In this lay the man Linton; he was huddled on the floor, dead. He had been shot through the heart. Danroy regarded him thoughtfully; perhaps this shot, not a roll of the ship, had awakened him. None of the hand-luggage in any of the cabins was disturbed, but Rossi had obviously taken his money-stuffed briefcase on deck.

"Well, just what happened doesn't matter a tinker's dam. The main thing is that it's happened," Danroy told himself. No sign of a revolver here or on the dead man. Odd! Ekhart had not had a gun while struggling with the non-tweedy Wagner, up above. "Good Lord, what a thing to happen! Out of this whole crowd, only the three Italians, Sigrid, and Ekhart are alive. Seven of 'em murdered or chucked overboard; it's a nightmare. And where's our champion, our murder-expert, Mr. Grauman? He should have been on deck with Macklin."

The answer came to him on the chiming chords of memory. That faint voice he had twice heard out of the sea, the struggler who had vanished; he recognized the voice now. Grauman, no doubt bitterly hated by the crew, had been chucked overside, probably when Macklin was knifed.

FEET pattered overside. He went out and saw Luis coming down. The Filipino was green-faced, with red, tear-streaming eyes, and cowered at sight of him.

"Not feeling so brash without a knife in your fist, eh?" snapped Danroy. "And you saw what Ramon got, did you? Let me see you once more with a knife, and you'll get the same. Now take Ramon's place. Get to the galley and get fast, and rustle up coffee and grub for all hands. Jump!"

Luis squealed something and went hastily away. Danroy glanced into the main and mess cabins, found nothing, and heard thudding footsteps on the deck above. He came back to the ladder and mounted to the deck.

No one was in sight, here abaft the deckload, except Ekhart and Sigrid. Ekhart was awake. He sat with his head and shoulders against the cabin transom. Sigrid sat beside him. She had a bucket of water and a cloth, and was bathing his face; he had been rather badly cut up.

Danroy went to them, nodded, and saw that the girl's shirt was torn half away.

"Hello! What's happened to you?" he demanded. She gave him a flashing look.

"Nothing much. That red-headed sailor tricked me. He got some water for me, then he grabbed me," she said.



They lifted Macklin into a berth. "Bring him around if you can," said Danroy.

"Oh! Leary, eh? Why didn't you shoot him? What d'ye think I gave you the gun for?"

She made a sullen grimace. "I've never shot a gun. It would not go off. I hit him with it and he ran away."

Safety-catch on, and she had not known about it.

"For a hellfire Nazi, you're not so hot," observed Danroy. He stopped and showed her the safety-catch and how to work it. "Now, most of your crowd's gone, and Macklin's hurt. I'm in command. Three of the Italians left down below. The first thing is to secure all the loot. I wish you'd do it and take charge of it, now and later. Put all the stuff into one cabin and lock it. Go do it, angel child. I've got things on my mind."

Without comment, without notice of his none-too-genial manner, she rose and went below. He called after her that grub would be ready soon; but she made no response. He sat down beside Ekhart and got out his pipe and pouch.

There was not so much as a cat's-paw ruffling the ocean now; noon was past, and the sun-blaze was something terrific.

"Have to get a tarpaulin rigged for an awning," said Danroy. "This sun is hot."

Ekhart began to laugh, a weak, hysterical laugh. He subsided, took cigarettes from his pocket, and lit one at Danroy's match.

"You sounded comical."

"No doubt." Danroy puffed his pipe alight. "Tell me, where's the gun you killed Linton with?"

Ekhart looked frightened. "Wagner knocked it out of my hand, overboard. It was awful! They were on my nerves. That fat ass Linton said they'd make a good Nazi out of me when we got to Martinique, and other things. He went too far. He hit me and I killed him."

"Good riddance," said Danroy coolly. "Don't weaken. We need you now. I don't know what the hell's going to happen when we reach Martinique, if we do. I'll depend on you."

This heartened Ekhart. "Where's the Captain?"

"Stabbed. Not dead, however. Old Reilly, the only honest man aboard, is looking after him just now. Three Italians left, but they don't count, I'm afraid."

Ekhart held the wet cloth to his raw, bleeding features. He looked out at the sea and horror distended his eyes.

"Makes you shiver to think about," he said. "There were sharks trailing the schooner, Danroy."

"Don't!" jerked out Danroy sharply. "Forget it, you fool."

"I can't. I never will. Why I started it I don't know; I didn't want to come in the first place. I'm an American, not a Nazi. Linton got my goat with his bullying."

"How did the hands learn about gold and diamonds?"

"Wagner and one of the others were having an argument about it early this morning. I suppose some of the men speak German and understood."

His voice trailed off. Danroy nodded. This gave the answer; this, and Rossi with his money-stuffed briefcase. Sheer mad folly, all of it.

Danroy examined the pistol he had found. It was fully loaded; a heavy, brutal weapon. He looked up as a shape appeared between the 'midships deckloads.

"Mr. Danroy!" It was Leary, sopping wet, speaking huskily, wiping his eyes. He had been trying to soak out the gas, apparently. "Can I come for a talk?"

"Come ahead," said Danroy indifferently.

The man came on. He wore only dungarees raggedly cut off at the knees. His blurring red beard had been

shaved recently, to reveal a bony countenance that was hard, boldly intelligent, and as evil as a gangster's dream. He squatted on the deck facing them, his gaze on Danroy.

"That was a hell of a dose you dished out," he said amiably. "It done for Kalinen, that old Finn in the starboard watch. He was a lunger anyhow. Just coughed up his soul."

There was a bruise over his eye, where Sigrid had struck with the pistol clenched in her grip.

"That won't hurt the record any," said Danroy. "It all goes into the log, and the log goes into court when you do."

"Forget all that baloney," was the scornful reply. "I'm givin' you a chance to come out alive and save trouble. You're stuck and you know it. There's ten of us all told."

"Won't be, if you start anything."

"Listen, Danroy; you don't savvy it. We got some rods ourselves, off'n them Dutchmen. We're wise to the whole game. We know what's down below; got a taste of it already." Leary grinned wolfishly. "You can bump some of us, sure, but that means fewer to share the pile and the skirt. And you'll go to hell with bells on."

"You can't run and hide here, Leary. You're at sea."

"More baloney," retorted the other, wiping his reddened eyes. "Listen. We aint far from Bermuda. We can tumble into a boat and make it or get picked up. Plenty of shipwrecked guys, these days. Rig a likely story and all's set. That's our out, see?"

Not bad, either, thought Danroy.

"What's your alternative?" he asked.

Leary scowled at him.

"My which? Oh, I get it. Well, you split the pile with us. We'll take a boat and go; you keep the blasted ship and your share, or take another boat and back up our story. Any way you play it, suits us."

The head and shoulders of Sigrid appeared above the companionway; she checked herself there, seeing them. She had donned a fresh shirt. She stood immobile, watching.

"Hiya, cutiel" said Leary, grinning at her.

She surveyed him, a scornful Valkyr. Ekhart straightened up a bit and, in a blaze of passion, cursed Leary for what he was. Leary chuckled and began some comment about the girl. Then he met Danroy's eyes, saw the twitch of Danroy's hand toward the gun in his lap, and shut up.

"Wise man," said Danroy, outwardly quite calm. "Now you'd better get for'ard."

Leary snarled. "Talk sense! There's you and him, here, and her, and that rat Reilly."

"And three more men, and Macklin. He's not dead at all," Danroy commented. "So you've got a gun or two, have you? And some half-addled brains. And a pack of ragged murderers. You and Sorenson are the only two in the bunch worth considering, and we'll pick you off first crack. Get for'ard."

Leary stood up. "Okay. It's your funeral," he said, and walked forward, ducking suddenly out of sight around the deck-house and galley as though fearing a bullet.

SIGRID came from the companionway and lit a cigarette. Ekhart straightened a bit; he was more himself now, resolution coming back into his face. Sigrid, who was holding the pistol in one hand, eyed him with a trace of human feeling.

"I've been talking to those three Italians," she said. "I don't think they'll be much help, though they're willing enough to work. All the valuables are locked in one cabin."

"Thanks," said Danroy. "You might give that gun to Ekhart. He's able to use it."

She complied. Danroy scanned the decks. Thanks to the galley and the deckloads, the gang forward had complete coverage. Luis came into sight, leaving the galley with a load and coming aft.

"We eat, anyhow," said Ekhart. "Well, Danroy, what's the program? What can we do?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," Danroy rejoined absently, watching the Filipino. "You folks go down and eat. I'll wait till you return, Ekhart. One of us must stay right here to keep the after deck clear of those rats. If they really have guns—Hello! Breeze coming up."

Luis passed them, with sidelong frightened glances, and went below. Ekhart and Sigrid followed. From the open transom Danroy caught the odor of coffee and spaghetti. He knocked out his pipe, rose, and went to the wheel.

A faint breeze was riffling across the water. Danroy knew that for the present he could not hope to work the ship; luckily, the canvas was off or reefed and the booms were lashed. Under the light air she heeled a trifle, answered the helm and moved slightly through the water. Danroy slipped lanyards over the spokes again, conscious that he made an excellent target for a bullet from forward, and sat again on the deck, waiting. Without a crew, the schooner was helpless. Ugly facts loomed squarely before him. How well-founded had been Macklin's fears! Leary and Sorenson must go; the other hands could then be cowed into obedience. Then the voyage could be pushed on to Martinique, far south. No particular sense in trying to make Bermuda . . . that would be to throw up everything, wages and all. Macklin would want to keep going. And Sigrid, Ekhart, the three Italians, would also want to continue rather than lose all they had.

"Yes, I've got to do it," Danroy sighed faintly. "No help for it; my job is to do the work. I can't shirk it."

He rose, slipping off the safety-catch of the pistol. Then he checked himself. Reilly was just coming up the companionway, wiping his lips.

"Mr. Ekhart sent me to spell you, sir," he said.

"All right. Shoot if anyone comes abaft the deckload." Danroy handed him the pistol. "How's Cap'n Macklin?" Reilly shook his head. "Bad, sir. He aint come around."

Descending the ladder, Danroy looked in on Macklin, who lay with eyes closed. He turned to the mess cabin, where Luis was serving the three Italians, Sigrid and Ekhart.

It was a rapid and unpleasant meal; the Italians had found voice and were assertive and blustering until Sigrid silenced them in cold contempt. She and Ekhart said little. Danroy said nothing, but ate and drank rapidly. Old Reilly with his one eye was worth the lot of them, he reflected. When he rose, the Italians crowded at him, demanding this and that.



"Shut up. You'll be working on deck soon enough," Danroy said. "Better get topside, Ekhart; I'll need you pretty soon. Luis, get for'ard and serve the men."

A faint voice reached his ears. He went back to the cabin where Macklin lay. The skipper's eyes were open; he was conscious. Danroy slid a pillow under his head.

"Well, I've got my number," said Macklin, his voice almost a whisper. The scar on his cheek stood out whitely. His eyes were dull and lifeless.

"Things aren't so bad. Cheer up," said Danroy. He realized with sudden shock that Macklin's gaze held no lucidity at all. Yet the man knew him.

"Played you a dirty trick," Macklin murmured. "That letter. A dirty trick to sign your name. Meant it for the best. Meant to tell you about it."

What hallucination was this? Danroy stooped, with calming words. Macklin ignored them, murmuring anew: "The letter! That last night ashore, I left it with a friend. To be sent in six days. I figured that was safe. It's been sent by now."

"Never mind, never mind." Danroy tried to assuage the fancies of the dim and wandering brain. He crouched beside the berth, putting his hand on Macklin's brow; its coldness startled him. He realized with dread certainty that the man was dying.

"To think those rats got me . . . never fired a shot!" came from Macklin, faintly.

"Everything's in hand," Danroy said soothingly, as he stroked the damp brow. The dark eyes turned to him.

"You don't understand!" With a flare of energy, Macklin stirred, moved, came to one elbow. "The letter! That's the important thing! I signed your name . . . your name . . . meant it for the best, Mr. Danroy—"

He let himself sink slowly back on the pillow. His eyes closed. His jaw fell and a trickle of blood ran out on his cheek. Macklin was dead.

WHAT had the man meant by this vague maundering about a letter? Was it the fancy of a dying brain, or was there some basis of fact? Well, no use asking now; it was a mystery unanswered and unsolved.

So thinking, Danroy headed for the deck. He was badly shaken, he felt unutterably weary and alone. It occurred to him that Macklin had once spoken of far California. So many places to see—too late now! Voyaging was done.

He was dimly aware that the girl Sigrid was following him up the ladder. He ignored her; odd how he thought of this strapping young woman as a girl! It flitted across his mind that if she had only shot Leary instead of striking him, a lot of trouble might have been saved. Something queer about that business, but he could not place it.

He found Reilly and Ekhart talking together by the port rail. Up forward, nothing was to be seen, though an occasional babble of voices was heard. The puffs of breeze had died completely away, the horizon was unruddled, the afternoon sky was brazen and unclouded. As Danroy crossed the deck to the two men, he thought of Macklin's strange hallucinations about a letter. To be posted in New York in six days. How long since they had left? Seven days, a full week. He himself had written up the rough log before going off watch early this morning.

"Give me the gun, Reilly. Thanks," said Danroy. He pocketed the weapon, and in return handed old Reilly the tear-gas gun. "Careful, now; it's cocked. Press that knob to release it. When we get the hands crowded into the forepeak, empty the thing after 'em. We've got to finish this business without mercy."

"Aye, sir," Reilly replied. "And the Cap'n, sir?"

"He won't need you any more." Danroy turned to the other man. "I'm counting on you to go for'ard with me."

"Okay." Pale but resolute, Ekhart understood.

"Here's an extra clip; it'll fit your gun. Shoot fast and everywhere. Leary and Sorenson are the ones we must get rid of without fail."

Next month Michael Gallister will give us "Terror in the Sunlight," a short novel about another type of wealthy refugee on the 1941 Atlantic.

"Okay," Ekhart repeated.

Another voice interposed: "Mr. Danroy, I want to speak with you."

Sigrid speaking; coldly aloof, she stood on the companion ladder. Her blue eyes dwelt upon Danroy with level gaze.

"Well?" he asked.

"Do you mean to attack those men?"

"Yes." Danroy was laconic.

"You must not. I heard what you said. You must not kill Leary."

Astonished conjecture stabbed at Danroy.

"D'you know what you're saying?" he snapped.

"Perfectly," she replied calmly, and extended an envelope. "Here is my authority to give orders on behalf of those who arranged this expedition. You are to call Leary here and do precisely as he says."

Danroy stared at her. He could not believe his own senses. She was standing on the top step of the companion ladder, yet her eyes were almost on a level with his own. In them he read only an icy, inflexible calm.

"I don't savvy this," he said slowly. "You can't want this vessel turned over to Leary. You know how he murdered your companions this morning, how he attacked you—"

"Why, you must be a fool!" she broke in scornfully, coldly hostile. "I could have shot him and did not. I can use a pistol as well as you. It was arranged that he was not to harm Ekhart; he could have done so this morning and did not."

A dreadful inkling began to crawl across Danroy's brain.

"Arranged?" he echoed.

"Certainly. Leary is not what he seems. He is Ernst Wolfheim, an agent carrying out direct orders from Berlin. I am to assist him in every way. Is that sufficient?"

It was sufficient to stun Danroy for an instant.

"If—if this is true," he stammered, "why did he kill those others, those Germans?"

She shrugged a trifle, quite unconcernedly.

"Perhaps you may not know that a great many millions in valuables and securities are aboard here," she said coldly. "His business is to obtain them for the Party, and to get rid of those who brought them. I shall expect your obedience at once."

Danroy looked at her, past her, toward Ekhart and Reilly; they stood against the opposite rail, their backs turned, watching the idle sea as they talked.

Once again came the queer sensation of time pausing and stopping, as the incredible truth burst upon Danroy. He remembered Macklin's words: *Nobody is what he seems. Face-value means nothing in real life. No man is what he seems; and no woman either.*

Leary had done for those poor devils of German-Americans, right enough; Leary, or Ernst Wolfheim. An impulse to grim laughter shook Danroy, and departed. A neat plan, to loot Germans and Italians out of uncounted millions, for the benefit of the Nazi party!

AMURDER plot, as efficiently cold-blooded as any scheme the Nazis had pulled off in Europe. And this girl had saved Ekhart; she was sweet on him. No wonder she had been in stark convulsions of horror this morning, when it had started; she knew only too well what was coming! The Nazi double-cross, sure enough!

Voices of the men forward drifted on the still air. They were probably eating around the forehatch, or in patches of shade. Danroy's eyes dwelt upon Ekhart and Reilly, as he felt himself waking. Probably not two seconds had passed; they had not moved.

"Do you understand?" Sigrid was demanding.

"Eh? Oh, sure, sure!" replied Danroy. As he spoke, he moved swiftly—tripped her, and threw her to the floor, so

that she slid sprawling down the ladder. Danroy was after her instantly.

She lay on the floor of the passage, inert. He dragged her by the feet into the nearest cabin and went about the business of making her secure. He worked fast, and left her trussed aloft and aloft, and safely gagged to boot.

Then he was darting up the ladder again, and saw Ekhart approaching.

"Hello!" said Ekhart. "Where's Miss Wetzler?"

"I escorted her below. Are you ready? Let's go. Stand by, Reilly! And keep back until we've driven those rats into their hole."

He knew that Ekhart did not suspect the hideous truth in all this affair. His own brain was ablaze with it, as he strode forward, heading between the 'midships piles of lumber. His pistol was in hand. Ekhart came after him, Reilly limping behind. He knew he must make sure, make sure!

A yelp of alarm broke from a man forward. Most of them were gathered, eating, in shadow of a boat by the port rail. They leaped up and scattered, irresolute, as Danroy appeared.

"Wolfheim!" he called. "Wolfheim!"

Leary stepped out, grinning.

"Got your orders, did you?" he replied jeeringly. "I thought you would!"

Danroy's hand whipped up and the pistol belched, again, again. Leary whirled around, clapping both hands on himself, and pitched into the scuppers.

Ekhart's gun was exploding. Bullets screamed across the deck. Men were screaming, yelling, running. Sorenson came into sight, staggering, stumbling at the hatch-coaming and falling, clutching at his throat. But there were answering shots. Danroy was dimly aware of a blow that jerked him half around; he felt no pain, and fired until the weapon clicked empty. A man with a gun darted from shadow of the boat, and Ekhart hit him as he ran; he doubled up like a shot rabbit and lay still. When those heavy bullets hit, they killed.

The men had ducked for cover, scurrying forward and popping down the forepeak. Reilly was hobbling along the deck when Danroy checked him.

"Reilly! Hold on! We've got 'em, down there. That stuff would kill them. Close the hatch and make it fast. Where are you, Ekhart?"

"Here. Right here," said Ekhart's voice.

"Three from ten leaves seven. We've got those rats where we want 'em, now. Those three out yonder; get their weapons. Leary had a gun, sure. Go over him carefully. See if he's got any papers, maybe a belt—"

His voice died. Something was wrong. He tried to see where Ekhart was, and could not. He got out a loaded clip and tried to insert it in the pistol, and could not. He let clip and gun fall to the deck.

"Hey! Mr. Danroy!" That was Reilly's voice, shrill with alarm. Danroy jerked and lifted his head. "What's wrong, sir? You hurt?"

Danroy did not reply. He was reaching out, trying to fend off the deck as it rose and rose. In spite of his effort, it came on up and hit him.

THE U.S. Atlantic Patrol plane *Kestrel*, as her crew had unofficially dubbed her, circled the motionless schooner twice, dipped to the glassy rolling surface, and halted. A rubber boat was put out and inflated. With four men in her, the boat put over to the schooner and the men gained her deck.

Lieutenant Fisher, U.S.N., stood staring at the scene. Three dead men in the afternoon sunlight; a lame little old man with one eye who danced around with delirious whoops of joy, and a half-naked, bandaged man who sat leaning against the deckload. No one else.

"Hello, hello!" exclaimed Fisher heartily, striding to the seated figure and putting down his hand. "Danroy, isn't it? I'm Fisher, class of '38!"

"I recognized you," said Danroy, shaking hands. "Remember I had a hell of a time hazing you in plebe days; couldn't make you sit on infinity. . . . Just dropping in for afternoon tea, are you?"

"Dammit, you're hurt!" cried Fisher.

Danroy smiled wanly.

"So it seems. Temporarily disabled. Reilly! Stop that crazy cavorting."

"Aye, sir," said Reilly.

DANROY looked up, squinting against the sunlight. "Well, Fisher? What brings you here?"

"You should know," said Fisher. "I'm working with Naval Intelligence. We got your letter, old man."

Danroy shook his head, astonished.

"Afraid I must be a bit off base. Maybe it's the sun—"

"Look here, I have news for you!" Fisher exclaimed in a burst of words. "About that confounded Naval Board thing out in Frisco. Remember Flint, don't you? He kicked off with pneumonia last month. We've been trying our darnedest to locate you. Flint talked before he died. Exonerated you completely; he was the guy at fault. They're going to reopen your case, old man; it means reinstatement, understand?"

"You're nuts," said Danroy foggily. "Or else I am. What letter are you talking about?"

Fisher squatted down.

"Listen, you! Don't play innocent. Your letter came in, telling about this craft and the clever scheme behind it. Too bad it didn't arrive earlier; since morning, a dozen planes have been out, sweeping the sea for trace of you. If this calm hadn't held you up, we might not have located you. . . . I'm miles outside the assigned search-limits as it is. Now do you get it?"

Danroy stared. Upon his wondering brain burst a flare of comprehension. Letter . . . the letter Macklin had sent, signed with his name . . . and Macklin's statement that he had prevented this source of evasion being used for political ends . . . Macklin, stiff and dead down below!

His hand fumbled at a belt lying on the deck beside him, a blood-blackened belt.

"Here," he said. "Take this. Belongs to that dead man yonder. Nazi agent. Seems to have papers in the pockets—haven't had a chance to look 'em over yet. What was it you said about—the inquiry? About reinstatement? Was I dreaming?"

Fisher repeated his words. Danroy's eyes widened.

"Good Lord! But see here, Fisher, I'm out of action. Got seven men locked in the forepeak—damned mutinous rats. And there's a chap named Ekhart, gone below. He and a girl. Sterling example of Nazi womanhood! Poor Ekhart's going to have a tough time of it. You ease things for him, will you? And—"

"Never mind all that," said Fisher. "Hold on a minute."

He flung an order at his three men. One of them jumped on the rail and began to wigwag. A voice floated back in response from the plane. Her propellers began to spin, her engine roared, she turned and taxied away. The engine-roar mounted. She skimmed the water, lifted, and drove off through the air.

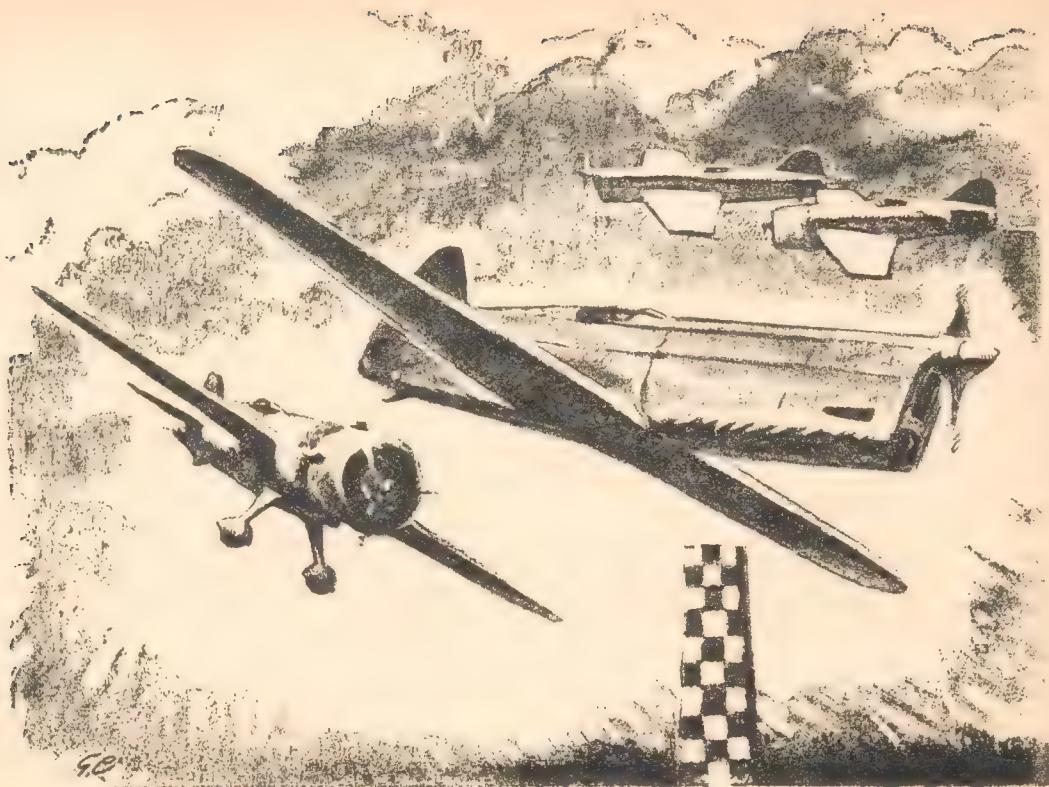
"I'm staying," said Fisher. "We're in charge of the craft now, and Nazis be damned! First off, we'll take care of you."

"Wait." Danroy's head lifted. "Something you can do for me first of all. There's a chap down below, dead. Macklin; he's the captain, or was. Ex-British officer; grand chap. I'd like to see him buried, with honors. Will you do it?"

"Surest thing you know, old man!" cried Fisher. "Or, I should say, Lieutenant Danroy, eh? Mr. Danroy, eh? Does that sound good?"

"Sounds like—sounds like heaven," said Danroy, staring up at the sunlight and not squinting either. "Yes. Sounds like heaven. . . . I wish he knew about it!"

But somehow, he felt that Macklin did know.



The Talisman

A stirring drama of the peace-time airways by the author of "The Crimson Current."

By WILLIAM E. BARRETT

DAN SULLIVAN walked across the gleaming lobby with the air of a man who owned it. His pace was slowed to that of Mrs. Murnane, who stepped timidly in great hotels, but he could not have enjoyed this moment more if he had been marching in behind a brass band.

He was the man who had once been Danny Sullivan of Dayton, a ragged son of poverty whose imagination had filled in for the toys he lacked by playing in the sky with the airplanes that flew constantly across the town. This was Mrs. Murnane who had given him slices of bread with sprinklings of sugar on them and this was Mary Murnane who had cried when he

teased her a little and punched back at him like a boy when he teased her too much.

Tonight he was a name in the newspaper headlines, a dramatic item in the loud-speakers of a million radios across the country. He was Dan Sullivan,—who flew airplanes faster than any human being had ever flown them,—the heavy favorite in tomorrow's Thompson Trophy race and a symbol of America looking to the skies in an era of National Defense.

He stopped at the door of the dining-room to sign the autograph-book

of a youngster who had stalked him hesitantly halfway across the lobby. His name leaped into being in ink under the guidance of his own fingers on a pen. He loved the sensation; the fact that the name was wanted for itself, for the fact that he had written it. He loved the touch of awe in Mrs. Murnane's pale blue eyes, too, and the shy way in which Mary looked at him.

Something expanded in him before the deference of the headwaiter, the sure, swift service of waiters who appeared magically to hold the chairs of his guests. This was a world to live in and he had earned the right to it; gleaming silver, snowy napery and

Illustrated by
Grattan Condon

glittering glass. The thundering Cameron engine which had carried him like a rocket from coast to coast in seven hours and sixteen minutes had taken him further and faster yet. It had taken him to this night from a hungry house where the poor folks lived in Dayton: a short hop from Cleveland and still a world away.

MRS. MURNANE had been fumbling with her glasses as a desperate pretext in the face of the terrifying menu, the silent, watchful waiter.

"Shall I order for you?" he asked. "Please do," she said in relief. "You know so much more about such things than we do."

Mary had been nervously plucking at a napkin, her lips held unnaturally tight. Dan Sullivan ordered deftly. He would have been overawed by waiters a year ago and intimidated by menus. He took them in his stride today and while it was not fun to take them thus in the presence of people to whom the accomplishment was a commonplace, there was a thrill in being able to do it before people who would be impressed. He smiled broadly as the waiter left.

"I wish Pop Murnane had been able to get up for the race," he said. "He'd get a boot out of this."

Mrs. Murnane touched her lips with her handkerchief, hesitant and unsure even in the simple gesture. Everyone in Dayton had called her husband "Pop" for so many years that she had adopted the habit herself, almost forgetting that he had once been "Michael" and later "Mike."

"It's so busy in the shops these days, Danny," she said, "that he's like a new man. It's not that he wouldn't have liked coming, but with things slack for so long, it's like a child he is now—so pleased at being useful again and wanted and paid good money."

Mary's left hand pressed the napkin into a linen hour-glass. "Dan doesn't know, Mother," she said; "he wasn't there." Her eyes met Dan Sullivan's. "It was pretty hard on Pop, Dan. There wasn't much work and they told him that he was old. Now they need him and—"

The sudden sweep of her hand told the story.

Dan nodded. "I know," he said.

There was sympathetic understanding in his voice, but he did not quite understand. The picture was vague to him. His memory of Pop Murnane was the memory of a jovial, red-faced, sober man who worked steadily in a community where most of the men either drank too much or worked too little; his memory of the Murnanes was a memory of a family that had more than their neighbors, a family able to lend an occasional two dollars to someone less fortunate or to send over a basket of groceries to those in

need. It was hard to imagine Pop Murnane as old, out-of-work or unwanted.

There was soft music somewhere behind the palms, white linen on the tables, people in evening clothes. This was Cleveland and this was the world of Dan Sullivan. He wanted to take Mary and her mother into it; he did not want to go back, even in imagination, to the world that was theirs and that had once been his.

He talked of airplanes, of funny things that had happened to him and of people whom he had met. Fulton Lewis had interviewed him once on the radio after one of his flights and that was a bond. The Murnanes listened to Fulton on the radio. They wanted to know what he was like.

It was so easy to talk about things like that, and the excellently served dinner was, somehow, unimportant. They had reached the coffee when

The Riddle of America's Godfather

SOME years ago we printed "Man's Boldest Adventure," the story of Magellan, written by the distinguished historian Stefan Zweig. Another work of fine scholarship and brilliant writing has now come from Dr. Zweig's pen—an answer to a great historical mystery: how did it happen that half the world bears the name of an obscure explorer who never even led an expedition of his own—Amerigo Vespucci? Watch for this remarkable document in our forthcoming January issue.

Tom Cameron crossed the room to their table.

Cameron was five years short of fifty; slender and gray, sharp-eyed and cloaked in dignity. There was faultless perfection to his dinner-clothes, an air about him of having inherited the earth. He was Tom Cameron of Cameron Aircraft, the biggest name in aviation. The little side-street machine-shop in which he had started was a long way behind him. He stopped and shook hands with Dan Sullivan, accepting the introduction to Mary and her mother with smiling gravity.

"I want to see you for a few minutes, Dan," he said.

Dan Sullivan looked at his wrist-watch. "I will be free in about an hour," he said casually.

It was a minor triumph, dropping that one. He could almost feel the breath intake of Mary and Mrs. Murnane. Tom Cameron wanted to speak to him—and he was making Cameron wait for an hour. They knew who Cameron was: the plant where old Pop Murnane worked was filling sub-contracts for Cameron Aircraft.

Tom Cameron bowed.

"An hour," he said. "In my suite."

He was gone and there was a tense silence at the table. Mrs. Murnane was gripping her napkin tightly.

"You should have gone with him, Danny," she said. "We're not important and we wouldn't mind. If you lose your job—"

"Dan won't lose his job, Mother."

Mary was looking at him strangely. Dan Sullivan felt suddenly uncomfortable. She had had a habit of looking at him like that once upon a time when he was just a shabby kid trying to impress her with extravagant boasts. She had never let him get away with lying or boasting. He felt now as though he had been caught boasting again. He did not normally act so independent toward Tom Cameron and Mary knew it instinctively.

They finished their coffee and once they left the dining-room Mrs. Murnane was clumsily obvious in her desire to leave him alone with Mary.

"I am an old lady," she said, "and I must lie down after dinner. You two young people have so much to talk about, I'll never be missed."

They took her to the elevator and crossed the mezzanine to a quiet corner where a potted palm shaded a divan.

The line of freckles across Mary's small, slightly tip-tilted nose was very noticeable against the sudden pallor of her face. She was not looking at Dan Sullivan; her gaze was far away.

"You like all of this, don't you, Dan?" she asked softly.

Dan was hunched slightly forward, dark, lean, intense; not nearly so sure of himself alone with Mary as he had been in the spotlight of the hotel dining-room.

"I love it," he said. "Don't you?"

She shook her head. "No. I don't belong."

"It wouldn't take you long to get used to it."

"Being used to something isn't the same as belonging."

"I don't know. It's just how you look at it."

She shook her head. "No. It's how people look at you."

"I never think about them."

"You don't have to. You're a hero. People are interested in you."

SHE turned, facing him. Her lips were full, tremulous, her eyes a kind of smoky blue that he remembered so well from all the years at Dayton. He had slapped her and pulled her hair—and kissed her. It was a long time ago and still it was not a long time ago. It seemed like yesterday. He stretched one hand toward her.

"Mary—"

She drew back. "Please, Dan. You have to go. Mr. Cameron wants to see you. You have to fly in that race tomorrow."

"That can wait. Listen, Mary—"

He was never sure of what he had intended to say. He had made no plans and had not built any real dreams around Mary Murnane. Her nearness and his memories of her woke something in him and there was an urge, undefined and undefinable, to sweep her into his arms. She slipped away from him and then they were both on their feet.

"I do not know how to help a man like you, Dan," she said, "and a woman's no good to herself unless she is helping some man. A woman should stay in her place, Dan, so don't let's talk any more. You've got to go."

He was bewildered, sure that she was answering what he would have said, experiencing a sense of relief that he did not have to say anything, yet feeling cheated of his rights in being anticipated.

"Mary," he said huskily, "you could be—"

She stopped him again, one finger against his lips. "I can pray for you tomorrow, Dan. I will. I'll pray hard." She opened her tiny bag and drew out a little gold cross. She pressed it into his hand.

"Dan, I had it blessed for you special. You wear it, and—and— Good night, Dan."

She turned and almost ran across the mezzanine. He took one step after her and stopped. It would look silly to chase a girl through a hotel and, if he caught her, what was there to say?

He stood there with the gold cross in his hand for a long minute; then, without looking at it, he put it in his pocket.

TOM CAMERON's suite was on the fourteenth floor of the hotel. One of the Cameron secretaries opened the door and Dan Sullivan waited patiently in the reception-room until Tom Cameron was ready to see him.

Cameron was seated in his own room with a highball glass in his hand. He waved Dan Sullivan to a chair but did not offer him a drink. Racing pilots did not drink highballs on the eve of the Thompson Trophy.

"How do you feel about tomorrow?" he said. "Do you feel that you're going to win?"

Sullivan had a pilot's aversion to flying his race anywhere but on the course. "Nobody has a better ship than ours," he said.

Cameron smiled grimly. "That's the way I feel." He leaned forward. "It is important that we win, Dan. The war has put a premium on speed. Several good-sized contracts are remaining open until after the race."

Sullivan shrugged. "That is pretty dumb. The best ship can lose on a closed course and still be the best ship."

"Many people do not realize that. We've got to win."



Rhoda Cameron

Dan nodded. There wasn't any answer to that one. Making speeches about what he was going to do was not in his line.

Tom Cameron sipped his drink, his eyes on Dan's face.

"You are flying for more than prize money," he said. "It is time that we moved you into the engineering department. With the prestige of tomorrow's win, you would be an asset to the Company on the staff."

"I like flying."

"Sure you do. You like racing, too. You like being a hero. That's only natural. But you cannot go on being a hero forever. Smart heroes step down off their pedestals before they crack up."

Dan Sullivan had felt that coming. The smart big names in aviation were the big names that had moved into shiny offices while they were still big. He knew that. It was part of the feeling that he had about tonight and about having guests from Dayton to dinner at the hotel. While he was a racing pilot, he belonged to all of this for just a few nights out of a year, the big event nights; with his name on the door in Cameron Aircraft, he belonged to it all of the time.

Tom Cameron was turning an unlighted cigar around in his fingers, his shrewd eyes noting the changes of expression in the younger man's face.

"Your guests tonight, Dan," he said, "—friends you knew in Dayton?"

"Yes sir. The best friends I had."

Dan's head had come up at the question. He sensed something in Cameron's voice that had not been there before. Cameron was looking at his cigar.

"Oh, yes," he said, "and the girl is quite pretty. There is one thing you should know, though, Dan."

"Yes?"

"Yes." Cameron's voice was soft. "A man can come up from the ranks.

He can cross the tracks and make people accept him. Or sometimes a woman can do it. But a man and a woman together?" He shook his head. "That cannot be done."

The eyes of the two men met and held. Somewhere in one of the other rooms of the suite, Dan knew, was Tom Cameron's wife: tall, stately, gracious, aristocratic. Tom had come up, two-fisted, out of overalls and flimsy cockpits; his wife had come out of the finest finishing-schools in the East. Together they entertained statesmen and diplomats—together they spelled "Cameron" to a world that knew little of horsepower but much of finance. Cameron Aircraft was not merely the product of a man and a design; it was also the story of a woman and her connections.

Dan rose slowly to his feet.

"I think that I understand," he said.

THEY shook hands and Dan Sullivan stepped out of the room into the little reception-room where he had waited. There was a girl standing there, a girl of no more than nineteen; breathlessly beautiful in the perfection of her grooming, the freshness of her youth. Dark hair flowed in soft curls from her proudly held head, dark eyes looked at Dan Sullivan.

She was small and a flame-colored evening gown clung to the gentle lines of her slender body. Her lips were crimson, her face almost white.

"I was waiting for you," she said.

There was no fencing in her attitude, nothing coy. She had her father's directness, her mother's cool poise. Dan Sullivan had met Rhoda Cameron before. He thought of her as something of a youngster, but something combative within him rose to a challenge in her that was woman rather than girl. He smiled at her.



Dan Sullivan

"I know. You are going to ask me if I am going to win tomorrow."

She shook her head. "I never ask people for answers that they don't have. You do not know." She broke a single bud from her corsage of rosebuds. "Do you know what roses these are?"

Dan Sullivan grinned. "Just roses. Kind of yellow roses."

"They are not yellow, at all. They are called Talisman roses. I am going to give you one."

She held the bud out to him and he took it mechanically. "Why?"

"Because it is a Talisman."

"Oh!" He looked at the rose, held it awkwardly for a moment, then wapped it in his breast-pocket handkerchief.

"Thanks," he said. "If I win tomorrow, I'll send you a dozen of them."

She shook her head. "No. Don't. Just win!"

Their glances met and clung. The look in the girl's eyes was not exactly personal interest; it was merely the admission that interest might conceivably be awakened. She did not shake hands with him. A current ran between them and that was enough.

In his own room, Dan Sullivan stood beside a window and looked down upon the lights of Cleveland. It was a long way from Dayton, not so far to a door with his name on it; a short way from Mary Murnane, perhaps not too far to Rhoda Cameron.

A passenger-liner flew across the city and the song of the engines came down to him.

IN the pale sunlight of late October, the Cameron Comet glittered. Steve Kaylor and his picked crew of Cameron mechanics and riggers were making the last-minute check of every part and fitting; two tons and a half of lightning-fast airplane designed to carry one man around a set of pylons in faster time than any other airplane in the world could carry any other man. Dan Sullivan made his own check and stepped aside with Steve.

"She's okay, Steve."

"Yep. She'll do."

They walked in silence toward the hangars, two men who shared a responsibility, men who knew each other from past testing. Dan rolled a cigarette on his lips without lighting it. Last night's problems kept intruding upon today.

"A man would be crazy to keep on flying fast ships when he could be doing something else, wouldn't he, Steve?"

Steve spat. "He would be plumb nuts."

"Thanks."

Dan Sullivan went indoors. Some flyers came to Cleveland on a shoe-string and with their own ships; the Cameron layout was de luxe. There

was a professional masseur waiting for Sullivan and the use of his services was "must." Tom Cameron was a bug on physical condition as he was a bug on engines. A racing engine must be perfect, a racing pilot's body no less so.

Under the ministrations of the rubber, Dan closed his eyes. It was good to relax, to feel his muscles kneaded, his nerves unkink. Vague thoughts ballooned in his brain, burst into nothingness and were replaced by other thoughts.

He had come a long way. Mary did not like the world he had showed her. Mary wanted to marry a mechanic like Pop. Lending two bucks to a neighbor, drinking a glass of beer with your supper, arguing politics in the barber-shop. . . . What a life that was!

Rhoda had teased him with her eyes. There was flame in her. Like her dress! She was music and flowers and silk and satin and jewels. No one would ever impress Rhoda. Probably he wouldn't impress her himself. Rhoda didn't need anybody like Dan Sullivan. Mary had said something like that. Mary said that Dan Sullivan did not need her. Complicated world, wasn't it?

The rubber was through with him and he lay there. This felt swell but it wasn't a career. You could not fly races all of your life. This was the way in which prize-fighters were readied for the ring, ball-players for the diamond. This was the way of all men who lived brief, spectacular lives that were dedicated to the thrill of a crowd. This was the way of heroes.

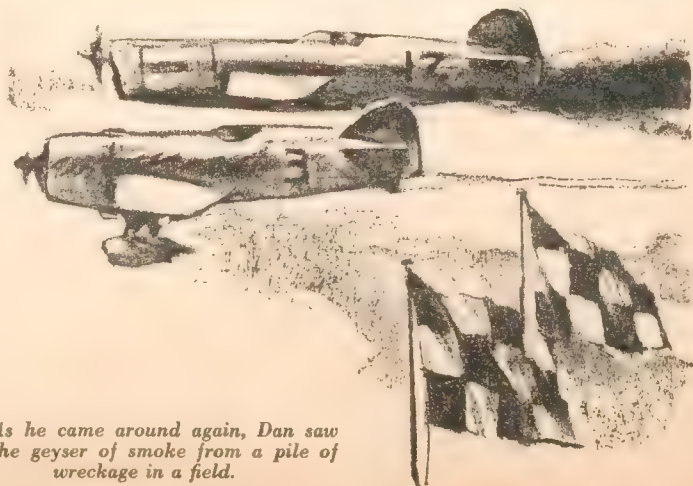
Beyond all this was his name on a door. He'd be the man who knew all about high-horsepower engines, no

longer a man who flew them. Rhoda! His mind stopped there. He felt a fierce excitement in his blood. He was Dan Sullivan and he had come a long way from Dayton.

THE excitement was still in his blood, the haze in his eyes when he went out on the field. Tom Cameron came over and shook hands. With him were his two aides: Calvert, the big broad-shouldered engine designer who smoked cigars; Weinert, the stress-calculations wizard who smoked cigarettes and looked like an invalid. These men were engineers. They did not have to bend fast ships around pylons; they sat in a comfortable box and watched the guinea pigs perform.

The press photographers were busy. They were shooting pictures of the competitors. Parke Werley was getting a lot of attention as usual. Winner of more races than any of them, he was a trifle paunchy now, loud, theatrical and a joke even to his fellow pilots when he was outside a racing cockpit. Then there was Lucas, another veteran who had spells when he walked on his heels like a broken-down prize-fighter; speed drunk. Coburn was new, a tough youngster with a boom company backing him. Riley was an in-and-outer with a ship of his own. Kling was a big company test-pilot taking his first fling at the Thompson. So they went, racers all, and a dime a dozen when the race was over.

At least, that was Dan Sullivan's verdict as he started for his own ship. Today lacked glory, whatever last night had been. Last night he had been a racing pilot on the eve of trying for his biggest prize; today he was just a chump with one more race to fly be-



As he came around again, Dan saw the geyser of smoke from a pile of wreckage in a field.

fore tossing the racket into the discard and taking a real job.

His name on a door! His name a part of an industry rather than a mere entry in a race! That was the stuff. The rest was tinsel and bait for fools who were content to be heroes.

HE sat in the cockpit waiting for the flash. The reading of every instrument was engraved on his brain: the tachometer, oil-pressure, supercharger gauge, fuel-pressure, oil-temperature, cylinder-head temperature. He could have chanted them like a litany. His body was tense, no thoughts in his brain, no impressions of anything or anyone. Other ships waited on either side of him, the crowd waited in the stands. There was sweat on his hands, on his forehead, a queer taste in his mouth.

Then the flash!

The ship leaped away almost without a command. He was slapped back in the bucket seat, temporarily smothered. No matter how softly you poured the coal to a ship like this, it literally crushed you in the first surge of its power.

The air was shattered by the thunder and the roar of engines. The world blurred. Earth and sky were a blend for a moment, then he was off; adjusting the pitch, heading for the scatter pylon, seeing the other ships

suddenly and checking them off in relation to himself.

The scatter pylon! He banked steeply and picked up the other ships one by one, memorizing them. He had to know where they were and how they were flying. He would be roaring around the pylons at better than three hundred miles per hour in a few seconds. It would be easy to brush wings where the lightest touch meant death. Every man in the race flew every ship in the race. He had to!

Pylon! The steep bank, dip, black-out, level-out. He was roaring along the course to the next pylon. The grandstand and the crowd dropped behind him and he checked his landmarks, the vari-colored roofs and the trees that lined up with his course. His nerves and muscles prepared for the quick dropping of the left wing for the pylon when his eyes caught the warning landmark.

Bank. Dip. Black-out. Level-out. He was flying in the number four spot. Werley was leading, then Riley, then Kling. Coburn was pressing Dan Sullivan hard and Lucas was staying close with Garan, the only foreigner racing.

The stretch again and the crowded roaring grandstand. Dan Sullivan tore a strip of adhesive off his instrument panel. One lap!

Coburn was wing to wing with him now, black smoke pumping from the

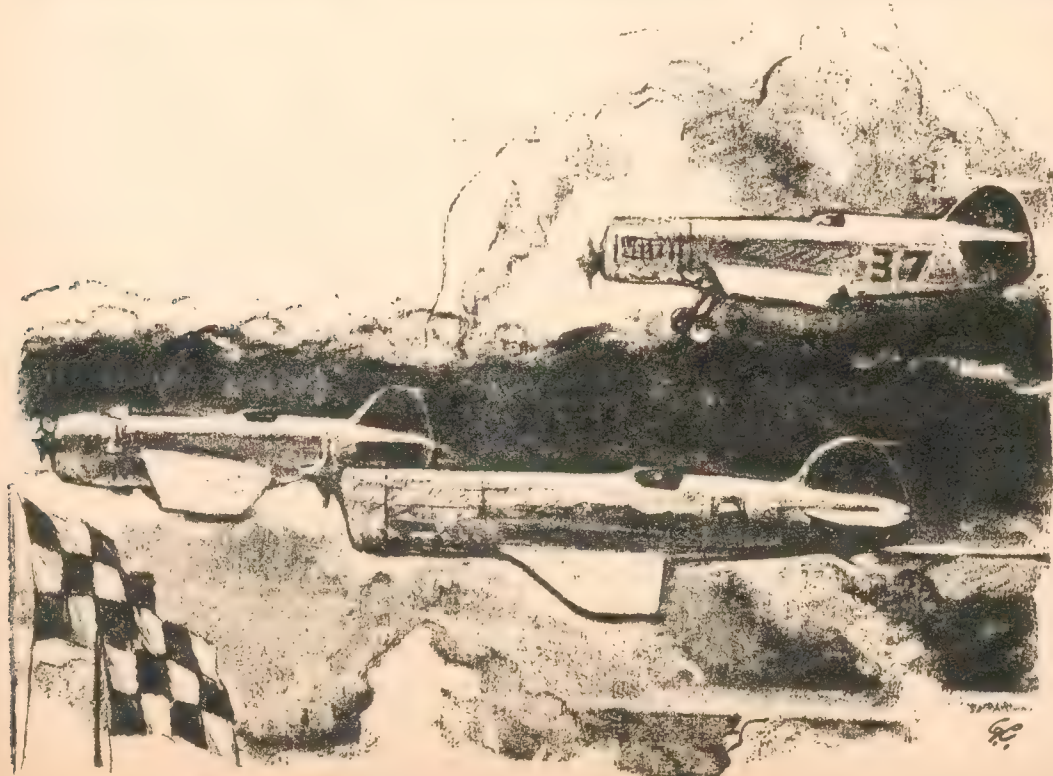
stacks. Coburn was bullying him, crowding for the pylon. Dan's eyes were narrowed, his body tense. He pulled up slightly and Coburn forged ahead; then he was roaring down, exchanging that bit of altitude for an extra burst of speed. He wrapped around the pylon at three hundred and fifty miles per hour with his spine cracking, temporarily blind in the black-out and fighting the ship out by instinct.

He had passed Coburn, but there were three ships ahead of him and Coburn was creeping up again.

SIX strips off the panel. Six laps. He roared into the back stretch where the pylons were 110-degree turns and Coburn was still with him. The ships ahead of him were clay-pigeons rising momentarily on his horizon as they took the turns; then suddenly he was in the shadow of another pair of wings.

Thundering out of nowhere came the checkered plane of Lucas, veteran of more races than Dan Sullivan ever saw. He was out to slash the competition down in one surging rush. Cutting the fifty-foot clearance demanded by the rules, he roughed Coburn into a wide turn, raced wing-tip to wing-tip with Dan Sullivan and fought for the pylon.

Dan turned with him. The world was heaving blackness for a moment,



then they were around it and the checkered plane was arcing high into the sky off the course—out of control!

Dan did not see him hit. He knew instinctively that he would—and the thought rode with him. Above the blasting power-song of his own engine, his imagination supplied the crashing, cracking sound of a ship going into the earth. Lucas! Speed-drunk, washed-up—and now nothing. There had been talk of barring him but he had flown a swell qualifying round and his "punchiness" had been gossip difficult of proof. Now?

As he came around again, Dan saw the geyser of smoke that rose from a pile of wreckage in a field.

He wasn't thinking. He wasn't a hero today. He wasn't a human being with human problems. He was merely the slave of this snorting monster that roared through the air at incredible speed. . . .

Ten strips off! Twelve! Fourteen! Climb, bank, black-out, level-out. He sat in and endured. Coburn had dropped back in the pack after Lucas

crashed. Riley's engine suddenly spurted plumes of smoke. The big gray ship zoomed away from the course. Dan's lips tightened. Riley was probably O.K., but his ship was through. Two ahead, Werley and Kling.

It was then that the little white head started dancing before Dan Sullivan's eyes. It danced on the nose of the ship and shivered in the sun. White. He stared in the stretches and blinked at it, then he knew.

Death! The death's-head! Lucas first, then Riley, then himself. He wouldn't walk away from what he got. No finish to this race for him.

He was going blind for longer periods now on the steep turns, the skull danced before him and Mary Murnane moved into the cockpit. She stayed for a while and then Rhoda Cameron came. Mary seemed to be saying, "I need you," and Rhoda was saying, "You need me." The engine roared, and he could not answer them. His stomach was sick and he had been tearing off adhesive strips forever.

He looked at the remaining slips. Six! Six laps to go.

As though the numeral six was a cue to some hidden, powerful pilot inside him, his tired body stiffened. He started to open up.

Death was riding with him. Death did not care if a man's name was on an office door or not. A man did the thing he could do best and he wasn't afraid of Death. A man was afraid only when Death threatened to take away something for which he had traded his soul.

The revs were away up now, the world a blur. He was coming up on Kling. Wing-tip to wing-tip; then he was by and Kling was dropping back. Werley?

He caught Werley with three laps to go and the crowd went mad as they dueling past the stand. Dan Sullivan didn't know. All he knew was that he left Werley in the back-stretch and that he was out in front alone when he pulled the next adhesive strip off the panel.

He was in front and alone when the last strip came off, when they flagged him down and the race was over.

They were mauling him and cheering him and he had a new course record and he was a hero again. Safe on the ground and a hero. No skull before his eyes, no flames, no death!

HE was alone for a moment with Steve, the mechanic, and Steve was half supporting him.

"Steve," he said, "you told me a man would be nuts to fly a race that he didn't have to fly."

Steve nodded. "Plumb nuts."

"Thanks."

Dan Sullivan drew two envelopes from his pocket. One of them had a rose in it; crushed and withered and dead. The other had a gold cross that was firm and hard and warm with the warmth of his own body. His fingers opened and the rose fell.

Rhoda and the name on the door were a race he would never fly. Life was too long a time to spend in a whirl around the pylons of Rhoda's world—his name on a door too slight a prize for the endless circle and the dizzy speed.

Death had taught him that when it came to ride with him. Death rode all the races and never lost.

He held Mary Murnane's cross hard in his hand. There were jobs for a flying-man to do, and a man with a job needed a woman to whom he could come home.

He was smiling when the photographers found him and a few million people thought he was happy because he had won a race. Only one person knew why he was smiling. Mary Murnane knew. That night on the hotel terrace, with Cleveland at their feet, he told her.



CAPTAIN EARNEST POTWA, of the New Orleans steam "bum" *Meteor*, walked the deck unhappily; and he smoked one Costa Rican cigar after another.

"We're doing no business," he said to McSlider, chief engineer. "I'm willing to put a low price on carrying stuff, but they all want it carried fast."

"Well, now," said McSlider, "that's something we can't do. The engines we got in this ship weren't built that way."

They were making for the harbor of Buna Ayre, one of the Dutch islands off Venezuela, in the hope there would be something; Potwa liked to get the price of the coal he burned, if nothing else. They drew nearer the shore, and then was there a coughing sound of a motor alongside, and a big, wide-shouldered young man came over the rail.

"Hey, what do you mean?" shouted Potwa. "Get out of this ship!"

But the young man looked as if he didn't mean to.

"You're the captain, aint you?" he asked. "Well, listen: I'm Tony Salvo." He put a big hand on the skipper's elbow and drew him to one side. "You've heard of me. I'm champion of New Orleans, of Cuba, of all what you call the Greater Antilles. Also of other places. Soon I will fight in New York, and then I'll be champion of the world."

Captain Earnest Potwa was of gangling build; he had a thin neck and a large Adam's-apple; also he had a silent way of laughing. And when he did this, the Adam's-apple moved up and down hilariously.

"Being in the ship most of the time, I don't get much chance at sporting news," he told the visitor. "But you look like a capable young fellow, and I wouldn't be surprised."

Tony Salvo still held his elbow.

"I got the money to pay my way to New Orleans," he said. "But I don't want you to put me down in the book."

"You under cover for something?" asked the skipper with interest.

"Listen," said Tony: "I'm in Havana for a fight, and while I'm there, I get two more fights for Caracas. As soon as I get to that place, I find the first fight's a fix. But they offer me good money; seeing Caracas aint no place much, and nobody'll ever know about it, I say O. K. In the fifth I was to go down."

"What about the second fight?" asked Potwa.

Tony grinned.

"I knowed you was going to ask me that," he said. "The second one was to be straight up. But at that, it had



The Tramp's Pug Passenger

A Caribbean hurly-burly by the author of "Mooney's in a jam."

by KERRY O'NEIL

an angle. The party I boxed in the first was a Chilean, and he didn't know from nothing. The idea was: if he could set me down, I wasn't much. And so the second guy, being pretty good, would carry the money. But I was to unstrap the stuff, do you see, and give it to him. That way the boys'd have two killings."

"That kind of thing's a science," smiled Potwa. "Nice, too."

"But sometimes the gears don't engage," said Tony. "And the first fight was one of those. The Chilean tried to be what you call realistic: in the fifth round he was all for knocking me apart. And that made me sore, and I flattened him. The fixers lost their money, and I had to run. I wanted to get back to Havana, but the only ship I could get was going down this way; and that's why I'm here."

"Then it's some gamblers that are looking for you, and not the authorities?" said Captain Potwa.

Tony looked at him steadily.

"No," he said, "it aint the authorities."

"I'll take you," said the skipper; "but we stop at Caracas on our way north. While there, you'll have to keep below decks."

THE rusty old *Meteor* chugged on, standing so far out of the water that she not only showed she was almost without cargo, but that she was sea-eaten as well. She had prowled the Leeward and Windward Islands for years, with little success. Short hauls, and not many of them; small prices, port charges, sharp-tongued officials, haggling shippers, all were an aggravation to Captain Potwa.

When the ship got fairly well into the harbor at Buna Ayre, she let go her anchor; Potwa, as an experienced small-port commander, never got too far into a harbor; he always felt his way. He was making ready to go ashore when a girl appeared on the ship. She was dark-eyed and unquestionably American; and she wanted to take passage to Caracas. Hardly had she been established in the vessel when a man was brought up to the *Meteor* in a sailing skiff. He was hulking and big-jawed, small-eyed, and looked to be a sort of island mongrel. He also wanted passage to Caracas. The girl was on deck while the man talked with the Captain; she did not look in their direction, but stood at the rail gazing toward the shore. But the man's eyes never left her.

"They are not strangers," was the thought of Captain Earnest Potwa. "I wouldn't be a bit surprised if something was going on."

Having installed his passengers, and received their fare-money, the skipper went ashore. Not far from the waterfront he turned into a narrow way, and in a moment or two came to Sam Go's place and went in. In a yard were heaps of scrap iron; inside there were cases, barrels and bales of merchandise. At the table by a dirty window sat old Sam Go; he had a hollow cough, and rounded shoulders. And he was dressed in a suit of soiled blue pajamas.

"Hi!" said Sam Go, smiling bleakly. "Once more, Captain. Very glad."

Potwa sat down and gave the Chinese one of the Costa Rican cigars.

"I hope," the skipper said, "you've got some business."

Sam Go discarded the cigarette, and lighted the cigar. It made him cough. "Nine, ten bales," he said. "Twelve barrels wine. Much hides in packs." He looked at Potwa. "You take medicine?"

"No," said Potwa briefly. "No kind of dope for me. At any price."

Sam Go grinned and coughed.

"Nice pay if you got nerve," he said. "What say twenty case rifle for Puerto Sacristi? And two dozen machine-guns?"

"There are too many people watching at that place," said Potwa, shaking his head.

"A boat will run twenty mile out; take goods off," said Sam Go.

"Done—if the price is right," said the skipper, promptly.

They haggled for a space; and when terms were finally agreed upon, Sam Go's beady eyes twinkled with an ugly amusement as he looked at the skipper of the *Meteor*.

"In your ship," he said, "you have some passengers."

"I have three," said Earnest Potwa proudly. "A small trickle of money, but it will help."

Sam Go went on: "There is a reward at Caracas. One thousand dollars. A man has been killed."

"You have a good deal of information come in at your door," Potwa said. "What else do you know?"

"Your woman passenger," said Sam Go, "is on her way to collect money."

"Not the reward?"

"No. The man who was killed was her husband. The money she goes to get was his."

"Which of the men has the price on him?" asked Potwa.

"The young one. It is a grand price," said Sam Go, "but not too much. I wonder," said the trader, and grinned widely, "if the youth knows the wife of the man he killed is in the same ship with him?"

"I couldn't say," said Potwa. "But I'll find out."

"If the sum of money with name of one thousand dollars is paid you," said the Chinaman, "half of it is mine."

Earnest Potwa grinned in his turn. "O. K.," he said. "I'll send it to you."

DURING the skipper's absence, Tony Salvo looked at the ship. Also at her crew. They were a mixed lot, and not many of them. The first officer was a thick-set man who answered when spoken to, but in as few words as possible. But McSlider, the engineer, was different.

"We don't often have passengers," said McSlider. "We're not geared for them. People usually like their comforts and wait for better ships." He wiped the sweat from his face. "Three passengers," he said. "All at once! Seems like it couldn't be so. And all on at the one place."

"All going to New Orleans?" asked Tony.

"The other two are stepping off at Caracas," said McSlider. "Queer thing about them: the girl pays no attention to the man; and yet the Captain says he's sure she knows him."

"She's nice-looking, too," said Tony. "When she looks at me, I have a feeling I've been looked at right."

McSlider smiled at this.

"Maybe you'd best not get feeling too much about her," he said. "The other party might not like it."

Tony hunched his shoulders at this, and he closed his big hands.

"He'd rock the ship if he fell," he said. "And that's what he'll do if he says anything to me."

Tony hadn't liked the man passenger, from the first look he gave him. There seemed to be a sort of threat in every movement the mongrel made; and the scowl he wore caused the short curling hair to crinkle tightly against Tony's scalp. But he favored the girl. The way she carried herself, the young pride in the uplifted chin; the dark, wide-spaced eyes.



"What she comes from," Tony told himself, "is nice people. Them silver-spoon kind of people you hear about every once in a while. But how she comes to know a punk like this fellow isn't easy to understand."

She did know him; that was plain. But she ignored him. She wouldn't permit her eyes to rest upon him for an instant. Once he approached her; and Tony got up, swinging easily on the balls of his feet. But the girl turned away and disappeared down the companionway. The man looked at Tony, the small eyes set deeply in the big face full of suspicion and sudden hate. Tony felt elated.

"I'm going to sock him before I even know his name," he told himself. "I can feel it coming."

It was dark when the skipper returned on board. Somewhere toward midnight the items of cargo being shipped by Sam Go were lightered out to the vessel and stowed in the hold. Once more the *Meteor* got under way; for Santa Cruz, her next port of call.

Tony Salvo saw nothing of the girl during the following day, but the male passenger was much in evidence. He was morose, his head sunken between his huge shoulders; and he seemed to be watching continuously. That evening, shortly after the gong sounded, Tony went into the cabin to a dinner



"I hit him. . . I was excited, and I guess I put too much English on it."

of steamed beef, steamed rice, soggy ship-baked bread, thick cups of strong coffee and dried-apple pie. The girl sat alone at the table when he came in. He took a chair quite near her, put his elbows on the table, and nodded and smiled. Now, when Tony Salvo smiled, it did something to him; he had even white teeth, and he showed them; also he had a boyish, careless something in his nature. The girl caught this instantly, and she smiled in return.

"What I'm doing," said Tony, "is hoping you're going through to New Orleans." He knew she wasn't, but he thought this was a nice thing to say. "These ships are a terrible bust if there aint anybody to talk to."

"I'm going to Caracas," she said. Something in the way she said this told him that she didn't want to go; that she hated the place.

"I've been there," he said. "No place to be in, at all. Why don't you pick out some swell little town where you can have fun when you travel?"

"There aren't many such places in this coast country, or these hot little islands," the girl said. "Or at least, I've never seen them."

There was a sadness in her voice; and Tony, as he looked at her, felt that this was all wrong. She shouldn't be that way; she ought to be cheerful.

"She's sunk about something," was his thought. "It's got her worried."

McSlider came in, and then the first mate. Tony gave them little attention; he concentrated on the girl, trying to draw her out. When the man passenger came into the cabin, he scowled at Tony; he sat down and ate his soup; he crumbled the ship-baked bread, muttering to himself. Then he spoke to McSlider.

"Thees ship aint no good; they aint got regulation. What for is people talking with girls they don't know?"

"I attend to the engines," said McSlider, "and the boilers. And I keep out of other people's business."

THE man stared at the plate of steam-cooked beef that had been put before him. Then he shifted his eyes to Tony Salvo.

"You lay off!" he said. "I'm Manuel Dragola. Thees girl is Christine Sandoval, and she's a friend of mine. And when I say lay off, you do it. That's all."

Tony dropped some lumps of sugar into his coffee and stirred them in the unhurried way he had when most intent.

"Listen," he said to the girl: "do you know this man?"

"He is not my friend," she said fearfully. "But I know him."

"She knows you," reported Tony to Dragola. "But you're not any more than an acquaintance. So what you got to say to that?"

Dragola pushed back his chair, and got up.

"I say not much," he said. "But I do plenty. Dragola is like that."

"Now, wait," said Captain Potwa, coming into the cabin at this moment. "Have a seat," he told Dragola. "And keep your temper. This is a merchant vessel and not a man-o'-war." He looked over at McSlider. "What's it about?"

"He objects to the other passenger talking with the young lady," stated the engineer.

The skipper had taken his seat at the head of the table.

"Anybody been annoying you?" he asked the girl.

"No," she said.

"Then that makes it all right," said Captain Potwa. "My advice to you"—to Dragola—"is to attend to your victuals and forget everything else."

"I am friends with her husband," said Dragola. "I am to protect her when he's not here."

"If she needs protecting while she's in this ship, I'll do it," said the skipper. He put mustard on his steamed beef, cut himself a fragment and chewed it thoughtfully. "You run a

gambling-place in Caracas, don't you?" he said.

Dragola gestured.

"She's a game of chance," he said. "Everything nice. Everybody treated respectful."

"Yes, I know," said Earnest Potwa dryly. "But we'll let that pass."

"I go to Buna Ayre to fetch her," said Dragola, pointing to the girl. "She must go back to Caracas to her husband."

The skipper took more of the beef on his fork.

"She'll be too late for the funeral," he said. "Seeing he's been dead almost a week."

Tony Salvo saw the girl go white; she put one shaking hand to her breast as she looked at the captain.

"Easy," said Tony to her. "Don't get up."

"My husband—dead!" she said.

"Do I understand you aint told her?" asked the skipper of Dragola.

Dragola wiped the sweat from his face.

"Who said that to you?" he asked the captain. "Who told you Henri was dead?"

"I picked it up while I was ashore. Henri Sandoval. A promoter. I'm sorry," said Captain Earnest Potwa to the girl. "Seeing you didn't know about this, I shouldn't have told it so sudden."

Her head was resting upon the table and she was sobbing. Dragola arose and was about to go to her; but Tony Salvo said:

"Keep away! If she wants to cry about her husband, let her do it. What are you butting in for?"

SEVERAL hours later, Tony saw her standing in the dim glow of the deck lights by the ship's rail. The old vessel was washing along through the night, heading northwest around the island, on her way to Santa Cruz.

"Listen," Tony said to her; "I'm sorry. That punk should have told you right away about what happened. What was the idea? Was he afraid?"

"No," she said. "Dragola was never afraid of anything or anyone—except Henri. Henri always said that. Dragola did not tell me my husband was dead, because he didn't want me to know until he had me in Caracas; and then I couldn't escape from him."

"No!" said Tony, amazed. "Look! I better go down and smack him a couple for that."

"Oh, no!" she said. "You must not get into trouble on my account."

"That wouldn't be any trouble," Tony assured her. "He's big; but when they're that way, you see them better; they're easier to take apart."

She told Tony that she'd married Sandoval because of her sick father.

"Henri said he'd take care of him," she said. "But we couldn't stand his

wildness, and we went back to Buna Ayre, where we'd lived before I met him."

Dragola had appeared there a few days before the *Meteor* came into the harbor. He had said Henri Sandoval was ill and that he wanted her to come back to Caracas.

"Henri had often written to me," she said to Tony. "He said he knew my father would die if he remained in this climate. Lately I knew this was true, and so when Dragola came for me, I said I'd go."

"Why did Dragola want you to go back there?" asked Tony.

"It is Henri's money. Dragola has always wanted that. And he wanted to have me where I would have no friends and would be helpless. And then he could do as he pleased."

Tony shut his big fists and walked the deck after she'd gone below. He glowered at the thought of Dragola; but Sandoval kept in the front of his mind. He'd heard the name somewhere before. Tony had never been one to remember names, but this one persisted; he turned it over and over. Then suddenly it struck a note. He put a hand into his breast pocket and took out some papers. There it was! On the contract for the fights at Caracas! And more than that. Sandoval had been the man who pulled the gun on him at English Johnny's Palace Gardens, and whom he had struck with a wine-bottle! And Tony, appalled, remembered he hadn't liked the way Henri fell. To be sure, he was accustomed to seeing them fall when hit, but Henri had gone down in a particularly ugly manner!

Tony thought of the way the girl had talked to him; it was as though she liked and trusted him.

"And now, look!" he said to himself. "I've killed her husband!"

When the ship reached Santa Cruz, McSlider went ashore with the skipper; and when he returned, he reported that Potwa was up to something.

"He was on long distance for some time," the engineer said. "Talking to Caracas. There must be money in it, for he had that kind of a look in his eyes."

After a few hours of unloading and loading at Santa Cruz, the *Meteor* got up steam and headed around for Caracas. Some time before their arrival at that port, the skipper came on deck, as he was accustomed to do. He smoked the last Costa Rican cigar of the day; he walked up and down, his hands in his jacket pockets and his narrow shoulders thrown back. After a space he spoke to the officer of the watch, as was his habit; then he looked at the glass and cast his eye along the sky. He was ready to go below and turn in, when he caught the sound of his girl passenger's voice.

"If you don't leave me," she was saying, "I'll call to the ship's people."

"Why do you say such things?" came the voice of Dragola out of the dimness. "I was the friend of Henri. I am your friend. Always I try to help you."

"I do not need your help," she said. "You know that I despise you."

"You are angry, and so you talk this way. You do not like it that I did not tell you Henri was dead. Isn't it so? But how could I tell you? Would I make you unhappy?"

"That is another of your lies. You have never hesitated to hurt anyone—if you got some sort of profit out of it."

"I want to be good to you," persisted Dragola. "You have no money. Henri has left you none. But anything I have is yours."

"It is a lie when you say Henri left no money. You want to steal it. But you shall not," said the girl. "That money is my father's life, and you shall not take it from me."

"Henri gambled a great deal," said Dragola. "He had no luck. But before he died, he said to me: 'Dragola, you shall take care of Christine.' And I said to him that I would."

"You are lying to me," said the girl. "Henri knew I never have liked you. He would not have asked you to take care of me."

THERE was a sudden stir. Potwa could vaguely make out the two figures; the girl was moving away, but Dragola followed her.

"Where are you going?" the man said. "Is it to Salvo? I have watched; I see you talking to him. But he can do nothing. Tomorrow when we reach Caracas, he will be in prison."

But the girl eluded him and disappeared down the companionway; then there was a sudden scuffle, breathless curses and a crash. It was Tony Salvo and Dragola. Dragola's huge hulk struck the ship's rail; but he pulled himself together and plunged furiously at Tony.

"Dirty rat!" breathed the young man. "I've been wanting to get a smack at you!" Dragola was upon him, but Tony struck sharply and stepped away. Almost instantly he was back, ripping murderous blows into the huge body.

Potwa shouted to the officer of the deck; a whistle shripped; a half-dozen men crowded in upon the battlers and tore them apart. . . .

Tony Salvo knocked on the door of the skipper's cabin a little later.

"What I want to do, Captain, is apologize for raising hell in your ship," he said. "I meant to save that sock I gave him for when I stepped ashore, but when I heard him say how I was going to be in prison, I knew what was coming next; he was going to tell her *why* I was going there."

"Does it make so much difference what he tells her?" asked the skipper.

"Listen," said Tony: "she's an awful nice girl. And if she's got to be told about what I've done, I want to tell her."

"What *have* you done?" asked Earnest Potwa, as he looked at Tony with interest.

"Well," said Tony frankly, "when I stepped into your ship a couple of days ago, I told you the authorities wasn't after me. And I didn't think they were. I didn't know I'd hurt that fellah so bad."

"You always take a chance when you shoot a man," said the skipper, and he looked at Tony questioningly.

"I didn't shoot him," Tony stated. "All I did was hit him with a bottle. I was excited, and I guess I put too much English on it. There was a crowd, all ready to go to work on me, and I had to do something."

CAPTAIN EARNEST POTWA had lighted his first cigar next morning and was walking the deck in his usual way when he saw Dragola leaning on the rail, staring at the sun-drenched water.

"You and this Salvo don't seem to get along," said the Captain to him.

"He's a crook," said Dragola. "When we get to Caracas, I'll show him something."

"You know English Johnny?" asked the Captain. "Manager of the Palace Gardens at Caracas?"

"He is a friend of mine," said Dragola.

"I talked with him on the telephone while we were at Santa Cruz," said Potwa. "And I told him I had Tony on board."

"Johnny will have the police waiting for him," said Dragola, gleefully.

"I think not," said the skipper. "Johnny's a business man; and right away he fixed up something. He's going to have the other fight."

"No!" said Dragola, astonished.

"On the date that was first made for it. That will be three nights from now."

"Johnny must have an idea," grinned Dragola. "He always does. He's smart."

"Because Tony cleaned up on the Chilean in the first fight," said the skipper, "the money'll be on him in this one."

"What good will that do? He will not quit," stated Dragola, his grin disappearing at once. "His kind never do. A man like that, nobody can trust."

"Listen," said Potwa: "this time you can put your money down and feel safe. Because I'm his manager. He'll do what I say."

"But the police will arrest him as soon as they hear he's in the city," protested Dragola.

"No one'll put a hand on him until after the fight. That was all fixed while I was on the telephone at Santa Cruz."

Dragola was pleased. He laughed. "It is good," he said. "I like it. We'll make money on this Salvo; and afterwards we'll shove him into the *calabozo*!"

While the *Meteor* plowed through the warm water of that sunny region, Tony Salvo sprang into sudden activity. He skipped the rope. He ran up and down the deck, hopping over obstructions with the swiftness and grace of a buck; he shoved and hauled with a huge, grinning black boy until they both were panting and running with sweat. Below decks Davy Gowan, the hard-jawed assistant to Mr. McSlider, slashed buckets of sea-water over him and kneaded and rubbed him for a half-hour at a time.

On the first day the girl, as she sat on deck, watched Tony wonderingly.

"I'm gonna fight," he told her. "And I've only got a few days to work with."

"You might be hurt," she protested; and Tony's spirits so lifted when he saw the look she gave him, that he felt like shouting.

"No," he said, "I'll be all right. None of these boys can put a hand on me if I don't want them to. Besides," he told her, "there're some things that must be done." He fixed his eyes on her. "You aint got no money?"

"No," she replied.

"You've gotta have some," he told her. "Because this fellah Dragola is going to get funny with whatever Sandoval left. That's the money you want for your father; so you've got to have a lawyer. And lawyers always charge for what they do."

She got up hastily. "Oh, no!" she said. "I couldn't let you do that."

"Listen," he said to her: "I'm Tony Salvo. Some day I'm going to be champion. And I don't like people saying no to me. Especially"—and he smiled in that boyish way he had—"people like you."

WHEN the *Meteor* steamed into the deep, mountain-shadowed indentation in the coast which was La Guaira, sea outlet for Caracas, and docked, Captain Earnest Potwa made himself ready to go up to the city. Tony saw him on deck in his shore-going clothes.

"Wait till I get shaved and a couple of other little things, and I'll go with you," he said.



"Which of the men has a price on him?" asked Potwa.

"Listen," said the skipper, a cautioning hand on Tony's sleeve: "it'll be best if you stay where you are until I get back. I've got a few things that I want to fix."

Potwa made a telephone call at the head of the wharf, then summoned a cab. In a quarter-hour he was seated at a table with English Johnny, manager of the Palace Gardens, a bottle of native brandy between them.

"How are things going?" asked the Captain.

"Nice," Johnny informed him. "All even. There'll be no trouble. I explained everything to the newspapers: that Salvo had been training under cover, and that he's in great shape." "There's been no charge made against him?"

"I fixed that," said the man. "The only trouble is with the inside boys on the betting. Salvo crossed them once, and they're afraid of him."

"If you're selling enough seats," said Potwa, "that oughtn't to make much difference to you."

"It doesn't make any," said English Johnny. "If they want to keep their money in their pockets when there's maybe a good thing waiting, they are welcome to do it."

Earnest Potwa looked at him.

"Seeing I'm now Tony's manager," he said, "maybe this'd be a good time to settle some outstanding business. There's a matter of eight hundred dollars that the boy hadn't time to collect after he dusted off the Chilean two or three weeks ago."

"I was going to mention that," said English Johnny. "You can have it right now."

"I'd like it placed," said Potwa, "where it'll do some good. In spite of everything there might be a person or so who'll want to put down a little money. And you might accommodate him."

WHILE the sporting portion of Caracas' population streamed into the Palace Gardens on the night of the fight, Tony Salvo left the ship with the skipper and McSlider the engineer. In the dressing-room at the Gardens they were joined by Davy Gowan, McSlider's assistant.

"While I stood at the gate, I saw Christine go in," he said to Tony.

Tony grinned.

"She said she wouldn't be here," he told them. "But I knew she would. She aint the kind that'd sit in a hotel room while a friend was maybe having his face lifted."

"When you were talking with them people out front awhile ago," said Davy, "this Idaho Burns, the fellow you're going to fight, was having you pointed out to him. He was laughing."

"Maybe he likes jokes," suggested Tony.

"He looks like a tough fellow."

"So I hear," said Tony easily.

"Keep your left high, and use your right to guard your chin."

Tony laughed. "Sometimes," he told Davy, "it's nice to do that with a right; but often I use it other ways."

"Put away the advice," said Potwa to the assistant. "Tony knows his stuff. He says some day he's going to be champion; and you don't tell things to people like that."

While the two men were making preparations for the handling of Tony, Captain Potwa visited English Johnny in the little cubbyhole he used for an office; and Johnny introduced him to a small man who carried himself importantly, and was fiercely mustached.

"Colonel Agelado, of the police. He's been saying he'd like a word or two with you," said the manager of the Palace Gardens.

"It is a pleasure to see you," said Agelado to Potwa. "Also to tell you I have six uniformed officials ready to take this man when the word is given."

"Very nice," said Potwa. "And as this fellow's pretty strong, I hope your men are big and able."

"It is not always size that counts," said Agelado stiffly. "They are trained men, and there will be no trouble."

"All right. But see that they are ready. The word will pass at the end of the fight; then they grab him."

"It shall be done," Agelado looked at the skipper with an inquiring eye. "We understand each other about the reward, I hope," he said.

"You get one third," the Captain told him. "I get one third. A party in Buna Ayre gets the other."

"One third pleases me," stated the police official formally. "And I shall be expecting it."

Captain Potwa nodded. . . .

There had been two slow, bruising, heavy-footed battles preceding the main event; the audience had been stirring restlessly; now it began to moan with expectation. A big sandy-haired young man had leaped into the ring, followed by a retinue of handlers. It was Idaho Burns. He was long-legged, had slim hips and tremendously wide shoulders. For a year past he'd been smashing his way through the fighting men in Central and South America, and looked a most formidable person.

Christine Sandoval, as she gazed at him, drew in her breath in dread. Tony was strong; she'd seen that. He was supple and quick. But this man frightened her! He looked cruel and fierce; he was like a great soft-moving cat that seemed ready to leap, ready to maim and kill. The moan of the crowd grew into a sort of subdued roar as Idaho Burns, his white skin glistening under the lights, moved here and there about the ring. The gathering somehow felt that here were the elements that would stir the blood.

"Thees is a man who fights," said a voice at the girl's side. "He's smash them down." It was Dragola, and he was smiling in ferocious satisfaction. "This Salvo is nothing: he has no chance."

JUST then Tony slipped between the ropes, and after him McSlider and Davy Gowan. Tony was brisk and confident. He cast one look at his opponent, ground his feet in the chalk and chatted with the engineer of the *Meteor*.

"Already," stated Dragola, "is he afraid. He does not look into thees man's eyes. One, two rounds, and it will be over."

"It will not!" said Christine, white and angry. "Tony will some day be champion. He has told me so!"

Dragola hunched his shoulders and spread out his hands.

"We shall see," he told her. "For myself, I feel sure. It was three hours ago that I went around with money to bet, and no one would take my offer. 'He will lose,' I told them, 'and I will give two to one.'"

Christine looked at him, a cold feeling at her heart.

"When I offered three to one," grinned Dragola, "thees English Johnny took it. I could see he did not think Salvo would win; but he did not want people to think he'd made a bad match."

There was the clashing of a bell; then came the shouting of a voice—names, places, weights, number of rounds, colors. There were instructions, with men huddled together, listening. Then a scattering: into corners, through the ropes. Then, splitting a breathless moment, one stroke of the bell. The men were in the center of the ring, and the first blows had been struck.

"You see, Tony bleeds," breathed Dragola exultantly. "It is Idaho who is best!" He appealed to Christine. "Why will you look at such a pretender?"

Tony snarled through the trickle of blood at his lips. He stepped about speedily, looking compact, dependable. He feinted. Idaho nodded his head. He knew all about such things; to him they meant very little. Again Tony feinted. Idaho stepped in, his right arm curving. Tony was inside the blow like a panther. And he struck sharply, once, twice, three times, and stepped away. Dragola said:

"He is fancy; but it is no good. Idaho will—"

But just then Idaho crashed to the floor. The referee was counting excitedly.

"Tony," said Christine, "will some day be champion."

She said this proudly, as she watched Idaho, now upon one knee, shaking his head to clear it.

"Salvo will lose," said Dragola, his eyes popping, but trying to be confident. "I have bet that he will lose. You shall see."

Captain Earnest Potwa had slipped into a seat behind the half-breed; and now he spoke to him, vexation in his voice:

"Do you know," he said, "it seems like as if a body can never depend on anyone. Here's Idaho down by the stern, and I don't know if he can get—but, yes he's up."

"But he's not look so good," said Dragola uneasily. "The knees shake." He turned his head, looking fiercely at the skipper of the *Meteor*. "I have bet three to one that thees Salvo does not win."

"You are impulsive," said Captain Potwa. "For look"—as there was another crash—"Idaho is down again! And this time I think he'd like to have some one hold his head."

Idaho had fallen face downward; Tony Salvo stepped back; the referee was counting. Christine was upon her feet, crying out excitedly. And Dragola said to her:

"Should you be glad for the good fortune of the man who killed your husband?" He tried to grasp her by the shoulder, but she shrank away. "You never loved Henri! You hated him! And so, he left you nothing. Not the smallest silver piece. Do you hear?"

Idaho Burns did not stir; he lay prone, and the referee continued counting.

"Sandoval wouldn't treat his wife that way," protested Potwa.

"I can prove it, by witnesses," said Dragola, mopping his face. "By people who heard him say it. And by the paper he wrote when she left him."

The referee threw up both hands. There was a rush into the ring by two sets of handlers. Idaho was dragged to his corner; Tony was having the gloves cut from his hands by McSlider. Captain Earnest Potwa was on his feet; he was searching among the seats near by. Then his eyes rested upon Agelado; the billowing noise of the place made words impossible, but he signaled, and the official and his men were instantly on the move. The referee was lifting Tony Salvo's right hand, the sign that he was victor; the crowd was on its feet cheering the sharp, decisive method of the battle, when the police closed in on Dragola and seized him.

COLONEL AGELADO, lifting himself upon his toes with every other word, was talking with Christine. Tony and Captain Potwa, in the office of English Johnny.

"At once," he said, "we knew that Sandoval, who was shot through the heart, was not killed by a blow. And the police physician said the blow had



Idaho stepped in, his right arm curving. Tony was inside the blow like a panther.

been struck at least two hours before the shot was fired. Dragola had fled. We had evidence that he was the assassin. But"—lifting himself proudly—"the police have methods. They are clever. At once the belief was circulated that the crime was done by Tony Salvo. We knew," said Colonel Agelado, "that this would bring Dragola back." He looked at Christine. "Of course, señora, what money Sandoval left will come to you in due course through the action of the courts."

"Speaking of money," said Potwa to Tony, "you get twelve hundred for beating Idaho. Also there is a matter of eight hundred coming to you for your job on the Chilean some time back. Making two thousand dollars in all. Which the Palace Gardens"—looking at English Johnny—"will now hand you."

"As my manager," said Tony, "you cut in on that for twenty per cent."

But Potwa waved his hand, his Adam's-apple much agitated.

"Not any," he said. "It's all yours. Glad to be of service to you."

Amid an astonished silence, the manager of the Gardens placed two sacks of silver on the table.

"One of twelve hundred," he said. "The other of eight hundred. Also"—a third sack in his hand—"this is—"

But Potwa stopped him.

"This," he said to the others, "is a little outside thing. Dragola made a bet with me—three to one. And the money was put up with Johnny. He laid me three to one you'd lose," he said to Tony gleefully, "and I win twenty-four hundred dollars in silver money. This trip will not be such a bad one, after all."

The Don Flozews

An epic of the Don Cossacks in the period just after the Russian Revolution.

Excerpts reprinted by special permission of the publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.

Copyright, 1940, by Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., N. Y. (777 pages. \$3.50 net.)

AFTER advancing for many days, the Vieshenska regiment at last came into conflict with the retreating Red Guards. One noonday the squadron under Gregor Melekhov's command occupied a small village nestling in a dense green of gardens. Gregor dismounted his Cossacks in the shade of willows growing close to a stream which had cut a shallow channel through the village. Somewhere near at hand springs were bubbling through the black, clinging earth. The water was ice-cold, and the Cossacks drank it greedily, scooping it up in their caps, afterwards clapping them on their sweaty heads with grunts of satisfaction. The sun shone straight down on the village. Sprinkled with the venomously sultry rays, the grasses and the willow leaves hung limply; but there was cool in the shade by the side of the stream. The burdocks were brilliantly green, the duckweed gleamed with a virgin smile in the little creeks, beyond a bend ducks were splashing and flapping their wings in the water. The horses snorted and dragged toward the water, pulling the reins from their riders' hands and wading into the middle of the stream. As they stirred up the mud, they sought with their lips for fresher water. The sultry breeze sent the drops spraying from their mouths. . . .

The Cossacks had just lain down to talk and smoke among the burdocks when their advance patrol returned. At the words "The Reds," the men at once started to their feet. They tightened the horses' saddle-girths and went once more to the stream to drink and fill their flasks, each man thinking: "Maybe this is the last time I shall drink such water, as fresh as children's tears."

The road led them across the stream. They halted on the farther side. Beyond the village, about a mile away an enemy patrol of eight horsemen was cautiously moving over the grey wormwooded and sandy rise in the direction of the village.

"We'll take them prisoner. All right?" Mitka Korshunov suggested to Gregor.

With half a troop he rode out of the village to outflank the patrol; but the Red Guards discovered the Cossacks in time and turned back.



When the two other squadrons composing the Vieshenska Regiment arrived an hour later, they advanced again. The patrols brought back the information that the Reds, numbering approximately a thousand, were coming to meet them. The squadrons of the Vieshenska Regiment had lost contact with the 33rd Bukanovsky Regiment on their right; nevertheless it was decided to engage the enemy. They rode to the top of the rise and dismounted, the horses being led off into a spacious hollow dropping down to the village. Somewhere to the right the patrols were already in action, and they could hear the rattle of hand machine-guns.

The thin line of the Reds appeared soon afterwards. Gregor stationed the men of his squadron at the top of the hill. The Cossacks lay along the crest, which was overgrown with scrub. From under a stunted crab-apple tree Gregor gazed through his field-glasses at the distant lines of the enemy. He could clearly see the first two lines, and behind them a further column of soldiers deploying into line among the brown ungathered shocks of cut grain.

He and the rest of the Cossacks were astonished to see a horseman, evidently the commander, riding on a high-standing white horse in front of the first line. There were two more in front of the second line. The third line was led by an officer; beside him fluttered a banner, a tiny crimson patch of blood against the dirty yellow background of the field.

"Their commanders go in front! That's heroic of them!" Mitka Korshunov laughed with sarcastic admiration.

Almost all the Cossacks raised themselves from the ground to look. Palms were set to brows. The talk died away. And a severe majestic silence, the harbinger of death, lay gently and softly,

like the shadow of a cloud, over the steppe and the valley.

Gregor looked back. Dust was billowing beyond the ashy grey island of willows down by the village; it was the second squadron riding to outflank the enemy. For a while the progress of the movement was hidden by a valley, but then some four miles away the squadron rode in extended order up a slope, and Gregor mentally estimated the time and place at which it would be in line with the enemy flank.

HE went back to his men. The Cossacks' faces, livid and shining with heat and dust, turned toward him. The men lay down, exchanging glances. At the command "Ready!" there was a rapacious rattle of bolts. From above, Gregor could see only outflung legs, the tops of caps, and backs in dusty shirts, the outlines of shoulder-blades wet with sweat. The Cossacks crawled from spot to spot in search of cover or better vantage points. Some attempted to dig hollows in the earth with their swords.

Meantime the wind brought the indistinct strains of singing to the hillside. The lines of Red Guards wound along unevenly, and their voices came faintly, lost in the sultry, spacious steppe. Gregor felt his heart beating violently and spasmodically. He had heard that groaning refrain before! He had heard the sailors singing it at Gluboka, devoutly removing their caps. . . . A sudden mournful anxiety grew within him.

"What are they roaring?" an elderly Cossack asked, turning his head cautiously.

"Gregor, you've been among them," said Andrei Kashulin, impudently

High Lights of

Home to the Sea

by MIKHAIL SHOLOKHOV

Author of "And Quiet Flows the Don."



glancing up at Gregor, standing close by him. "You know what they're singing, don't you? I expect you've sung the song yourself."

"... Own the earth..." the words came clearly at that moment crossing the intervening space, then the silence again descended over the steppe. The Cossacks were amused, and someone in the middle of the line burst into laughter.

"Do you hear that? They want to own the earth!" Mitka Korshunov sneered, and cursed foully. "Gregor Pantaleev! Shall I send that one on horseback off his horse?"

He fired without waiting for permission. The bullet disturbed the rider, and he dismounted, handed his horse to a soldier, and marched on foot in front of his men, his bare sword gleaming.

The Cossacks began to fire, and the Reds lay down. Gregor ordered the machine-gunners to open fire. After a couple of rounds the first line of Reds rose and advanced at a run for some thirty yards, then again lay down. Through his field-glasses Gregor could see them working with their trenching tools, digging themselves in. A bluish dust hung above them, and little mounds like mole-hills grew in front of the line. An irregular volley came from the mole-hills. The battle threatened to be protracted. In less than an hour the Cossacks had losses: one of the first troop was mortally wounded, three others crawled back to the horses in the hollow. The second squadron appeared on the enemy's flank and galloped into the attack. It was repulsed with machine-gun fire, and the Cossacks galloped back in panic, scattering and riding in bunches. The squadron was reassembled, and silently advanced

again. And again the squall of machine-gun fire drove them back like leaves before the wind.

But the attack had shaken the morale of the Red Guards. The first two lines were flung into confusion and began to retreat.

Without ceasing fire Gregor brought his squadron to its feet. The Cossacks began to advance, not stopping to lie down. The first irresolution passed, and they were emboldened by the sight of a battery galloping into position. The first gun was posted and opened fire. Gregor sent a man to order the Cossacks in the hollow to bring up the horses. He prepared for the attack. By the crab-apple tree whence he had watched the opening of the battle a third gun was posted. An observer and a senior officer were standing about half a mile away... gazing through field-glasses at the retreating lines of Reds. Telephonists were running with a wire to connect the battery with the observation post.

There was a howling, shattering roar, and Gregor watched for the shell to fall. The first shrapnel covered the rows of ungathered wheat, and a white, cottony clump of smoke hung against the blue background. The four guns in rotation sent shells into the rows of cut wheat, but, contrary to Gregor's expectation, the gunfire caused no perceptible confusion in the ranks of the Reds. They continued to retreat unhurriedly, organizedly, and disappeared into a valley. Realizing the senselessness of attack, Gregor none the less decided to discuss the matter with the commander of the battery, whose appearance inspired him with confidence. He awkwardly went up to the officer and, touching the end of his moustache with his left hand, gave him a friendly smile.

"I thought of leading my men into the attack," he said.

"How can you attack?" The captain shook his head violently, wiping the sweat away from his brow with the back of his hand. "You can see how steadily they're retreating, the swine! They won't yield. And it would be absurd to think they would: all their commanding officers, men raised from the ranks, are in those sections. An old comrade of mine is there."

"How do you know?" Gregor asked distrustfully.

"From deserters. Cease fire!" he ordered his men, and, as though to justify the command, explained to Gregor: "Our fire is not achieving anything, and we're short of shells. You're Melekhov, aren't you? My name's Poltavtsev." He drew some cigarettes out of his pocket. "Have a smoke?" He offered Gregor one.

With a muffled thunder the drivers galloped up with the limbers from the hollow. Gregor mounted his horse and led his squadron after the retreating Reds. The enemy occupied the next village, but yielded it without a struggle. The battery and the three squadrons of the Vieshenska Regiment scattered through the village. The terrified inhabitants would not show their heads outside their huts. The Cossacks swarmed through the yards in search of food. Gregor dismounted outside a hut standing a little apart, led his horse into the yard, and tied it up by the porch. He found the master of the house, a tall, elderly Cossack, lying on the bed, groaning and tossing his disproportionately small head on the dirty pillow.

"Are you ill?" Gregor smiled at the man.

"Yes, I'm ill."

But the man was only feigning illness and, judging by the uneasy shifting of his eyes, he guessed that Gregor did not believe him.

"Will you give my Cossacks some food?" Gregor demanded imperatively.

"How many are there?"

"Five."

"Well, bring them in. Whatever God has sent us we'll give them."

AFTER eating with his Cossacks, Gregor went into the street. The battery was drawn up in full fighting order by the well. The horses were

eating barley from baskets. The drivers and gunners were sheltering from the sun in the cool of the ammunition boxes or were sitting and lying around the guns. One gunner was stretched out fast asleep, his legs crossed, his shoulders twitching. Probably he had lain down in the shade, but the sun had shifted and was now scorching his uncovered curly hair, in which wisps of hay were mingled.

The officers and commander of the battery were sitting and smoking on the ground, their backs against the wall of the well. Not far from them a group of Cossacks sprawled in a six-pointed star over the burnt weeds, drinking sour milk from a pitcher and occasionally spitting out grains of barley which had found their way into the milk.

The sun streamed down mercilessly. The village streets were almost deserted. Cossacks were sleeping under the granaries and the roofs of the sheds and in the yellow shade of the burdocks by the fences. The horses standing saddled by the palisades were exhausted and drowsy with the sultry heat. . . .

Bored with nothing to do, Gregor was about to turn back into the hut; but three Cossack horsemen from another squadron rode down the street, driving before them a small group of Red Guard prisoners. The artillerymen stirred and sat up, brushing the dust from their coats and trousers. The officers rose to their feet. Sleepy Cossacks came running out of the neighbouring yards.

The prisoners—eight sweating, dusty youngsters—approached. They were surrounded by a dense crowd.

"Where did you catch them?" the battery commander asked, examining the prisoners with cold curiosity. With a touch of braggadocio in his voice one of the escort replied:

"We found them in the sunflowers by the village. They were hiding like quails from a kite. We saw them from our horses and rounded them up. We killed one. . . ."

The Red Guards fearfully herded together. Evidently they were afraid they would be summarily executed. Their eyes ran helplessly over the faces of the Cossacks. Only one, apparently older than the rest, his face brown with sunburn, in a greasy tunic and puttees worn to shreds, contemptuously stared across their heads with his black eyes and pressed his lips together. He was thickset and broad-shouldered; on his black hair, as as coarse as a horse's mane, was a cap evidently preserved from the days of the German war. He stood at ease, his thick black fingers with dried blood on the nails fumbling at his unbuttoned shirt collar and his hairy Adam's apple. He seemed to be perfectly calm, but one leg a little behind the other,

monstrously thick in the puttee wound to the knee, was quivering. The other men were pale and without outstanding characteristics. He alone struck the eye by the sturdy breadth of his shoulders and his energetic, Tatar face. Perhaps that explained why the battery commander turned to him with the question:

"Who are you?"

A light came into the man's tiny eyes, like fragments of anthracite, and almost imperceptibly, yet neatly, he drew himself up.

"A Red Guard. Russian."

"Where were you born?"

"Penza province."

"A volunteer, you snake?"

"Not at all. I was a senior non-commissioned officer in the old army, found myself in the Red Guards in 1917, and have remained in them ever since. . . ."

One of the escort intervened. "He fired at us, the swine!" he informed the officer.

"Fired?" The captain frowned sourly and, catching the gaze of Gregor standing opposite him, he indicated the prisoner with his eyes. "What a—! Shot at the Cossacks, did you? And didn't it occur to you that you might be caught? Supposing we settle accounts with you here and now?"

"I was going to shoot myself." The man's broken lips bristled into a deprecating smile.

"And why didn't you?"

"I had used all my bullets. . . ."

"Ah!" The captain's eyes were cold, but he stared at the soldier with undisguised satisfaction. "And you . . . where are you from?" he demanded in a very different tone, running his eyes over the others.

"We were from Saratov, Your Excellency . . . from Baleshov," a tall, long-necked youth whined, blinking and scratching his head.

Gregor curiously examined the youngsters with their simple peasant faces and their obvious appearance of infantry conscripts. Only the one black-haired man aroused a feeling of hostility in him. He turned to him half in anger:

"Why did you admit just now that you fired at the Cossacks? I suppose you were in charge of a Red company, weren't you? A commander? And a Communist? You'd used all your bullets, you say? Well, supposing we sabre you on the spot? What then?"

The nostrils of his shattered nose quivering, the Red Guard said still more boldly:

"I didn't tell you out of dare-devilry. Why should I try to hide it? If I fired at them I ought to admit it. That's what I say. As for the rest—Sabre me if you want to. I don't expect any mercy from you." He smiled again. "That's what you're Cossacks for."

High Lights of

An approving smile ran round the ring. Humbled by the soldier's deliberate tone, Gregor turned away. He saw the prisoners go over to the well to drink. A company of Cossack skirmishers marched in column formation round the corner.

LATER, when the regiment reached a period of incessant fighting and the front stretched in a winding line, Gregor was continually falling in with the enemy. When in immediate proximity to them, he always felt the same keen feeling of tremendous, insatiable curiosity about the Bolsheviks, about these Russian soldiers with whom for some reason it was necessary to do battle. It was as though the naively boyish feeling which he had experienced in the first days of the German war, when he had seen the Austro-Hungarian troops for the first time, had remained with him for ever. "What sort of men are they? . . ."

Once more in the course of a battle he came almost face to face with Red Guards. As he was riding with a troop patrol along the bottom of a ravine, he suddenly heard curses in Russian and the sound of footsteps. Several Red Guards, a Chinese among them, came running over the crest and, dumfounded at the sight of the Cossacks, froze stock-still for a moment.

"Cossacks!" one of them shouted in a terrified voice, falling to the earth.

The Chinese fired a shot, then in a harsh, sobbing stutter shouted as one of the Cossacks fell:

"Comrades! Up with the Maxim! At the Cossacks!"

Mitka Korshunov sent the Chinese down with a shot from his revolver and, swinging his horse round, was the first to gallop back along the side of the ravine. The others galloped after him, attempting to pass one another. Behind them sounded the baritone voice of the machine-gun. The bullets shrilled through the leaves of the brambles and hawthorns growing over the slopes and tore up the stony bottom of the ravine.

Little by little Gregor began to be steeped in hatred for the Bolsheviks. They had burst into his life as enemies, they had taken him away from the land! He noticed that the other Cossacks were dominated by the same feeling. It seemed to them all that it was only because the Bolsheviks had invaded the Don province that there was any war at all. As each man looked at the ungathered swaths of wheat, at the uncut grain trodden underfoot by his horse, he remembered his own land over which his women were toiling beyond their strength, and his heart was consumed with fury.

the New Books

Fewer prisoners were taken. More frequently summary execution was meted out on the spot. A wave of looting swept over the front: the Cossacks pillaged the families of Red Guards and those suspected of Bolshevik sympathies; they stripped the prisoners naked. They took everything, from horses and wagons to quite unnecessary articles. Cossacks and officers all stole. The baggage trains were piled high with trophies: clothes, samovars, sewing-machines, harness, anything that had the least value. From the baggage trains the articles flowed homeward in a steady stream. Relatives arrived at the front, willingly bringing ammunition and provisions and piling their wagons with plunder. . . .

Gregor had never been able to behave like the other Cossacks: he took only food for his horse and himself, refusing to touch anything else and loathing pillage. He was especially repelled when his own Cossacks looted. He kept a tight hand over the squadron. If any of his men took anything, it was in secret and very rarely. He gave no orders for prisoners to be stripped and exterminated. His unusual softness of heart caused discontent among his Cossacks and the regimental command, and he was summoned to give an explanation. One of the members of the staff roared at him roughly:

"Ensign, what are you spoiling your squadron for? What's all this liberalism of yours? Preparing a soft bed for yourself against a possible change in the situation? Playing with both sides for old times' sake? Now, no arguing! Don't you know your discipline? What? Replace you? We will! I'll give orders for you to hand over the squadron this very day, and no grumbling from you, brother!"

He was reduced to the rank of a troop commander. . . .

CHAPTER EIGHT

A CHAIN of days, link forged within link. Marches, battles, rests. Heat and rain. The mingled scent of horse's sweat and the hot leather of the saddle. Blood that under the continual strain is turned to a boiling steam in the veins. Through lack of sleep a head heavier than a six-inch shell. Gregor longed for rest, for sleep. And afterwards to walk along the soft furrow left by the ploughshare, whistling to the bullocks; to hear the trumpet call of the cranes, to remove the flying silver gossamer from the cheeks, and to drink of the autumnal scent raised from the earth by the plough.

But instead, grain slashed by the blades of roads. Along the roads

crowds of prisoners, unclothed and cadaverous, black with dust. Squadrons trampling the roads, threshing the grain with iron horseshoes. In the villages, requisitions on the families of the retreating Reds, whippings for their wives and mothers. . . .

All autumn a sluggish struggle went on. The main strategic centre was Tsaritsyn, and both Reds and Whites flung their finest forces in that direction. In consequence neither side had any strong preponderance on the northern front. The Cossacks had large forces of cavalry and, exploiting this advantage, they carried on co-ordinated operations, flanking movements, and attacks on the enemy's rear. But the Cossacks gained the ascendancy only when they were opposed by morally unstable divisions consisting of newly mobilized Red Army men drawn mainly from the area immediately behind the front. The Saratov and Tambov men surrendered in thousands; but as soon as the Red command flung a workers' regiment or a sailor detachment into action the situation was changed, and the initiative passed from hand to hand, only victories of local significance being won by each side. . . .

It was evident that Gregor's star still burned with a quiet, flickering gleam. Evidently the time had not yet arrived for it to break away and fly off, burning the sky with its cold, dying light. During the autumn three horses were killed beneath him, and his jacket was holed in five places. Death seemed to be playing with him, wrapping him in its black wing. One day a bullet pierced through the copper hilt of his sword, and the sword-knot fell at his horse's feet as though bitten off.

"Someone's praying hard for you, Gregor," Mitka Korshunov said to him, and was astonished at Gregor's cheerless smile. . . .

From the end of November the Reds took the offensive. They stubbornly forced the Cossack divisions back to the railway line. After a long struggle, on December 29 the Red cavalry threw back the Cossack 83rd Regiment; but in the section held by the Vieshenska Regiment they met with a desperate resistance. From behind the snowy selvages of yard fences the regimental machine-gunners welcomed the enemy infantry with a hail of bullets. The machine-gun on the right flank spread a rain of death, while on the left flank certain squadrons were thrown into a flanking manoeuvre.

Toward evening the feebly advancing Red Army forces were replaced by a detachment of sailors newly arrived at the front. They poured into the attack against the machine-guns, not lying down and not shouting.

Gregor fired incessantly, until the barrel of his rifle was red-hot and

burned his hands. He cooled the rifle, then again thrust in cartridges, aiming with screwed-up eyes at the distant little black figures.

The sailors smashed through the Cossack defense. Taking to their horses, the squadrons galloped away through the village and up the rise beyond. Gregor glanced back and involuntarily dropped his reins. From the hillside he could see the far-stretching, mournful snowy steppe, with little mounds of snow-covered bushes, and lilac evening shadows lying along the sides of the hollows. For the length of a mile over the steppe lay the bodies of sailors shot down by the machine-gun fire. In their sailor jackets and leather jerkins they looked like crows settled on the field.

In the evening the disintegrated squadrons, having lost contact with the regiments on either side of them, halted for the night in two villages situated on a little stream, a tributary of the river Buzuluk. All night transport wagons were dragging through the village where Gregor's squadron was quartered. A battery halted for a long time in the street. Gunners and staff orderlies wandered into Gregor's hut to warm themselves. . . .

All the next day the regiment was retreating. Transport wagons galloped along the roads. From somewhere to the right, beyond the grey clouds veiling the horizon, came the thunder of gunfire. The squadrons splashed over the melted road, the horses churned up the wet snow with their hoofs. Orderlies galloped along at the edge of the road. Silent crows stalked awkwardly, like dismounted cavalry-men, about the wayside, importantly watching the retreating columns of Cossack squadrons, skirmishers, and lines of wagons as though reviewing a parade.

Gregor realized that nobody could halt the springs of the retreat now. The same night he deserted from his regiment.

"Where are you off to, Gregor?" Mitka Korshunov asked, watching with a smile as Gregor put on his greatcoat and fastened his sword-belt and revolver holster.

"What do you want to know for?"

"I'm just curious."

Gregor's face worked, but he replied merrily, with a wink:

"To the land of 'mind your own business.' Understand?" He went out.

His horse stood saddled. Until sunrise he galloped over the frozen field by-ways. "I'll stay at home, and I'll hear as they go by and can rejoin the regiment," he thought casually of those with whom he had been fighting side by side only the previous day. By evening of the following day he was leading his horse, worn out and emaciated with the two-hundred-mile ride, into his father's yard.

BOB WESTON climbed the long stairs that led up out of the chemical plant and into the roaring bedlam of the stamp-mill. He went slowly because he was tired, and each lifting step brought him closer to the iron roof with its storage of midsummer heat. When he came out onto the platform that ran along in front of the sixteen huge steel-jawed ore-crushing machines, he looked at the watch on his wrist. It was eight o'clock, and he decided to call it a day.

Bob Weston was the junior engineer in charge of the mill and chemical works that extracted the gold from the rock of the Lone Star Mine. For thirteen hours that day he had been looking for something in the sweltering four-acre plant, and he hadn't found it. He was beginning to be pretty sure he wasn't going to find it.

He went across beyond the crushers and into the little assay-room, sliding the thick soundproof door shut behind him. Rex Canuel, one of the two night-shift men, was sitting on a bench there, smoking a cigarette. Smoking in the plant was strictly against the rules, but Bob made it a point not to notice it, because he knew that too much noise and heat could stack up and raise hell with nerves.

"If being a boss means hours like yours, I'm glad I'm a working stiff," Canuel said, and his face looked dark and greasy with sweat. "Don't you never go home to eat, or nothing?"

"I'm going now," Bob said. "And if you just keep your fingers crossed, we might get a thunderstorm to crack this weather."

As he started for the outside door, the phone rang, and he came back to take the receiver off the hook. He said, "Yes. . . . Okay, I'll be right over," and hung up.

"Now what?" Canuel said sourly.

"The boss," Bob said. He went out the back door of the assay-room and across the dusty mill-yard. He felt tired and jumpy, and he didn't like what was ahead of him.

HARDROCK" ANGUS MCGARCLE had an eye that could drop a young mining engineer at forty yards, and a tongue that could skin him and hang the hide up to dry before the body stopped rolling. He also had a barrel of salt brine for a vocabulary, and he didn't believe in letting raw meat spoil.

Bob knew that this summons had to do with his last month's report. That report had some very sour notes in it, and he knew that it was going to be used to build a fire under him.

The big outside office was empty, and Bob went right on in to McGarcle's room. The second he saw the too-indulgent smile on the old man's

LOST GOLD

Somewhere in that hell-roaring stamp-mill gold was disappearing, and our young engineer was on that fatal spot behind the eight ball.

by RALPH
CONDON

face, he knew that Hardrock was on the warpath and that he was in for it.

"Well, well, my boy!" said Hardrock McGarcle. "Come in and sit down."

Bob thought he saw the old wolf lick his lips.

"It was good of you to drop in," McGarcle said, and his voice sounded like somebody honing a careful edge on a skinning-knife. "I know you keep long hours and must be tired, but I thought we'd best have a little chat."

Bob knew that the "long hours" crack was made not because of his time in the plant, but because it had been crowding on toward two o'clock that morning when he delivered Molly McGarcle home to old Hardrock's door.

Molly was the twenty-three-year-old blue-eyed sum of everything that Bob Weston wanted in life. She was also the apple of her father's eye, and Hardrock made no secret of the fact that he was not anxious to lose her to any junior engineer.

There had been a country dance the night before, and on the way home Bob and Molly had found a lake with a moon shining across it; but this didn't seem the time to mention it.

"I've been reading your report," said Hardrock McGarcle, and gained an inch on the cigar he was chewing.

Bob knew what was coming, and he could hear the old man sloshing around in the depths of his verbal brine-barrel.

"If I hadn't read that report with my own eyes, I might have gone on for the rest of my life thinking that two and two make four instead of three and a half."

"Well—" Bob started, but Hardrock cut him off with a lifted hand and said with murderous sarcasm:

"Oh, that's all right, Weston. I'm convinced. How could I help being convinced when you've got the proof down in black and white!"

He stabbed the report with a grim finger.

"Here you've been running a hundred and fifty tons of ten-dollar ore every twenty-four hours. That makes four thousand five hundred tons in thirty days, which, according to my old-fashioned way of figuring, ought to show a gross clean-up of just about forty-five thousand dollars. Of course, when I read your report, I find that it doesn't mean forty-five thousand dollars—it means something less than forty thousand, which proves conclusively that two and two make three and a half."

"Listen," Bob said defensively, "I know how those figures look, but I've checked everything—every assay—a dozen times. I—"

"I read your report," McGarcle said. "I read all of it; and before you start telling me things, I guess I'd better tell you something you don't seem to know."

"When I hire a man to run a stamp mill and chemical plant for me, I don't interfere with him. I let him run it his own way, but what I expect to get in return is gold—not a lot of damned excuses. If a guy tries to give me excuses instead of gold, I fire him and get somebody that will give me gold! Now you're just five thousand dollars short in the last thirty days' take, and I guess I don't have to tell you what I mean when I say I expect you to find it for me!"

"No," Bob said grimly. "You don't have to tell me, and I'm not going to kid you; I don't know where that extra gold went to."

"You don't suppose," Hardrock McGarcle said, and the words were like a spool of barbed wire being unrolled, "that you might have got to thinking about a lot of things besides business, and let that five thousand dollars worth of gold run off down the hill in the waste-water and sludge?"

"No," Bob said. "I don't suppose I did. I know it never went out in the waste, because I slapped so many assays on that stuff that it looked as though I were packing it all out in a bucket-line."

"All right," McGarcle said, and his eyes were cold. "You say that you know it didn't go out in the waste. Well then, you find out where it did go, and get it written into this report before I turn it over to the board of directors next Saturday morning. If you don't get it accounted for, the owners are apt to have some very nasty ideas; and getting fired will be just

about the nicest thing that can happen to you!"

"Before Saturday!" Bob exploded. "You know as well as I do that that gold is hung up somewhere in the chemical system, but that I can't locate it in two days' time! There's a million gallons of new stuff going through the dissolving tanks right now, and I couldn't get them cleaned out in a week! What do you want me to do, dive down and bring it up in a lunch-bucket?"

McGarcle's eyes didn't warm up at all as he rasped through his cigar:

"I don't care how you get it. You claim that that five thousand dollars' worth of the yellow stuff is bogged down somewhere in the processing system! Well, I don't believe it, and I'm not going to believe it until you prove it to me!"

The tone made Bob so mad he let himself go. He lunged across the desk and thrust his face close to McGarcle's.

"I can't find that stuff by Saturday, and you know I can't find it by Saturday," he yelled. "You're just riding my tail because of Molly, and you can

go to hell! I quit! Get yourself a trained monkey to run your lousy stamp-mill!"

He spun around on his heel then, and slammed out so fast he didn't hear Old Hardrock snarl after him:

"I've got a monkey, but he aint trained!"

AS Bob pounded down the stairs into the yard, he knew he had been angled into blowing his top and making a fool of himself by a man who held a master's card in the tongue-lashers' union, and the idea didn't cool him off any. Another thing that didn't do his peace of mind any good was his realization that the old man was right and he was wrong—had been wrong ever since the early part of the last month when he started to lose gold and hadn't gone to McGarcle for help.

In a modern gold-refining plant the ore-bearing rock from the mine is fed into stamp-mills that grind it down to the size of fine sand. A portion of the

gold which is "free" is taken out there with quicksilver amalgamation. The rest goes on down with the sand and mud to the classification-tables, where agitation and water separate the heavy particles, containing the metal, from the lighter worthless content. From the classification-tables, the rich concentrate is run through revolving ball mills that grind it still finer before it is dumped into tanks where cyanide and water are added.

After the cyanide has had time to dissolve all the gold in the concentrate, the stuff is run over vacuum suction drums which pull the clear gold-bearing solution out of the muck. From the vacuum drums, the "pregnant" solution is pumped into a mixer, where powdered zinc is added to cause precipitation; and from the mixer it is run through a canvas filter-press which collects the newly precipitated gold and zinc.

Bob had made three clean-ups of the filter press during the month covered

Illustrated by
Grattan Condon

(Coincidence! Author and
illustrator are not related.)



The gun-pressure was gone from Bob's back. . . . He swung around savagely—as the seventh and eighth batteries fell silent.

by that fatal report, and even after the first one he had known that he wasn't getting as much of the precious metal as the assays showed he should be getting. Instead of going to Hardrock with his trouble right then, he had simply figured that the extra "pay" was hung up somewhere in the system, and had gone ahead with operations.

After he had made the second clean-up and found the shortage doubled, he had still been cocky and foolish enough to believe that he could find the trouble if anybody could, and had said nothing.

He had weighed every ounce of concentrate that had gone off the classification-tables to the chemical plant, and slapped so many assays on it that he couldn't look a set of test-tubes in the eye, but it hadn't got him anywhere. . . . Every test was as it should be; but when the filter-press had been pulled down for the third and last clean-up of the month, the result was the same as the other two. There hadn't been enough gold.

BOB knew that somehow he had failed in his job, and failure meant more than just being bounced into the ranks of the unemployed with a mark against his record. It meant the smash of a lot of very swell plans, because a job-hunting tour wasn't Bob's idea of a honeymoon for a girl like Molly.

He didn't look forward at all to telling her about things, but he decided that right then was as good a time as any to make everything completely bad, so he went around the building to his car. When he reached for the door, it was shoved open from the inside, and Molly McGarble slid out.

"I'm the girl you were going to call for at seven-thirty. Remember?"

"I did," Bob said. "But I was detained."

"Detained is hardly the word for what happened to you," Molly told him. "Don't you know better than to bandy words with that old terror?"

"I think I'm beginning to get the idea," he admitted, "but I seem to be getting it a little late. Molly—"

"Don't tell me," Molly said. "I've been in the back office eavesdropping for the last half-hour."

"Which ought to help you recognize an unemployed man when you see one."

"Which helps me to recognize the fact that you can't quit now, even if Dad took your temper seriously," Molly corrected him flatly. She was standing with her square little chin tilted up into the glare of a yard light, and she looked as grim and set as old Hardrock himself. "You've got a right to clear yourself before you quit or are fired or anything else!"

"Clear myself?" Bob grunted. "Say, this is—"

"Yes, I mean *clear yourself!*" Molly said. "Darling, don't you know you're in a jam? What do you think Dad was trying to tell you? Don't tell me that you think he's getting too old and feeble to handle a five-thousand loss with the stockholders—he could handle fifty thousand if it was legitimate and he had a chance to show them where it went. But he can't show them where this went, because your report claims everything was working just right in the plant. It looks as if somebody had stolen that much, and the suspicion will fall right on you—because you're the only man that has the combination to the filter-press!"

"Say!" Bob said. "If you think—"

"Stop it!" Molly commanded, and stamped her foot. "You know I don't think so, and neither does Dad; but

the stockholders don't know you, and I'm not going to let you run away now and start a lot of whispers that you'll never live down!"

He put his big hands on her shoulders and grinned ruefully down at her.

"Listen, sweetheart; I just did a very noisy job of quitting in there, and if I don't get out of camp, I'll just be handing your dad the pleasure of running me out!"

"He won't run you out of camp," Molly promised. "But he just wants you to find what became of that gold. Isn't there anything at all we can do?"

"I've tried everything but an ouija board to find that stuff," Bob said, "and I guess you know enough about gold-processing to understand what we're up against."

"In the first place, all we're sure of is that we lost about five thousand dollars' worth of gold somewhere in between the point where the concentrate goes into the dissolving-tanks and the time we precipitate it back into a metal state with zinc and pick it up in the filter-press. We know we lost that much, because we assay the concentrate and weigh it before it goes in, and we know how much we got out of the filter. What we don't know is what became of it in between, and it isn't something you can just go in and pick up. In fact, you can't even see it after the cyanide is added, because the gold is actually dissolved and you can't tell the solution from clear water until you make an acid test."

"I can follow all of that," Molly said, "and if you know the extra gold didn't go out in the waste, it *must* be somewhere in the chemical system."

"That," Bob said grimly, "is what I told Hardrock; but proving it is a different thing than telling him."

"All right," Molly conceded. "Maybe we can't prove before Saturday that that gold is in there, but if we *can't* prove that, they can't prove it isn't, either, and that's the way we are going to face this thing."

"Which brings us right back where I started with your father," Bob said wearily. "You see I happen to be the guy that's paid to prove things around here—or else."

"Oh, Bob," Molly said desperately, and put her hands against his chest, "please listen! It doesn't matter if they just fire you for losing the gold; we can go away together and start somewhere else. The thing that matters is what people will think and say if you go away now without facing this thing out! I know we haven't much to work with—but we've got to use what we have and not make things look any worse. If you stay here and stand up to them—show them your tests and prove you were really doing your job, they'll know you didn't steal anything, and they may even give you another month to prove you are right."



Molly was working slowly, seriously.

Bob looked down into the girl's eyes for a moment and then pulled her toward him.

"I'll stay," he said. "With a side-kick like you, I've got to stay! I'll run a brand-new set of tests from the bottom to the top, and I'll take 'em to him right in the tubes so he'll have something to show his directors beside figures!"

Molly gave him a hug. "When can you do it?"

"Now," Bob said. "I'll at least curdle his breakfast with the proof that there's no gold going out in the waste!"

"And I'm going with you."

"Wait a minute," Bob protested. "Your dad—"

"My dad had better be getting used to the idea of my being with you," Molly told him. "Let's go."

Together, they almost ran across the mill-yard and went in through the little iron door on the stamp level. . . .

Inside, the full tide of sound swept over them in a wave, and Bob paused a moment to let Molly's senses adjust themselves to the racking shock of the stamps.

Sixteen batteries of them, there were. Ten stamps to the battery and each separate stamp a ton of steel that was lifted and dropped a clear two feet every three seconds. It was an unholy din that seemed to kill every function for the first seconds of entrance.

Speech was impossible; but after a moment, Bob took Molly's arm and led her into the plant. They cut down a flight of stairs through the classification-machines and came out on the main floor where the storage-tanks and chemical mixing-vats stood.

At the far end of the main level was the heart of the whole plant. It was there that the zinc was added to precipitate the dissolved gold out of the cyanide solution as it was pumped through the great canvas-lined filter.

REX CANUEL and Wilson, the other night-shift man, were working by the zinc feeder as Molly and Bob came down the last flight of stairs, but Bob didn't stop to talk. He went on by, got a sample beaker from the testing cabinet and drew a little of the filtered outgoing water from a valve beyond the canvas collector.

Testing that strained water for traces of lost gold was part of regular plant routine, and Canuel came across as Bob was finishing. He jerked his head toward the valve and yelled:

"I took the regular sample half an hour ago."

"Keep it for the daily report," Bob shouted in his ear. "This is extra." He nodded to Molly, and they went back through the tanks and upstairs to the assay-room.

With the sliding door closed behind them, the din wasn't so bad, and Molly said in relief:



"I quit! Get yourself a trained monkey to run your lousy stamp-mill!"

"This is still bad, but it's better. What do we do now?"

"We test this water with acid to make sure it isn't carrying away any gold," Bob said. "After that we'll test the waste mud off the vacuum drums, and so on right up the line. I want two each of these, so you can work one set while I do another. I'll tell you how as we go along."

He set up a sample rack at one end of the table and poured a few drops of fresh water into a new test-tube for her.

"Keep your hands away from your mouth," he said. "This stuff is poison, and—"

The end of his warning was drowned as the plant door slid open to let the crash of the mill wash in.

It was Rex Canuel, coming to speak of a pump-motor that was heating.

"It aint throwed nothing yet, but I wish you'd come have a look. It's hotter than a firecracker!"

Bob felt like telling him to let the pump go to hell, but a boss can't start

ideas like that among his men, so he followed the man out and Molly went along.

The bad pump was down on the classification level; and it was hot, all right, but it didn't take Bob long to fix it, because he found that it was throwing against a partially closed valve.

He opened the valve, shut the motor down to cool for a while and threw some oil into it.

Canuel rated a bawling-out for his carelessness in not checking the valve, but Weston wasn't the kind of boss who wasted any time bawling out his men. He just told him to let it stand five minutes before he started it again and went back upstairs to the assay-room.

"If those guys will leave us alone for a couple of hours now," he told Molly, "we'll finish this up and get out of here. This water test is the quick one, and we'll do it first so you can get the hang of this business."

He poured some of the sample beaker's contents into a tube of his own, got down a rack of bottles and went to work.

"Now, this test is easy. We do it once every eight-hour shift just to make sure that no dissolved gold is being carried on through the collecting filter with the water. You put a few drops of arsenic acid in your sample—like this—then a few of ferric chloride and a few more of hydrochloric-acid solution. Then you just fill your tube up to the hundred c.c. mark with fresh water, slosh it around a little and drop in a piece of zinc. If there is any liquid gold in the stuff we're testing, the whole contents of your tube will turn red in a very few minutes."

He set his own finished experiment down and stepped back to watch Molly.

She was working slowly and seriously, with her tongue pinched between her teeth and her brows drawn together in concentration.

HE waited until she had finished, then turned back to his own experiment and said disgustedly:

"See—no soap! If we had the slightest trace of gold in there, it would be starting to turn color already. I didn't expect—"

"But Bob!" Molly cried. "Mine is turning color! It's turning red!"

He yelled, "What?" and spun around as if he had been kicked.

It was true. The liquid in Molly's tube was showing pink, and when he picked it up and shook it, the color darkened and spread.

He whirled back to his own. It was still clear.

Molly said doubtfully: "Maybe I got the mixture wrong when I put the acid in."

"A wrong mixture wouldn't turn it red. It takes dissolved gold to do that," Bob said, and his voice was tense from the monstrous idea that was churning in his mind.

"But there couldn't have been any gold in that test-tube," Molly pointed out. "It was a brand-new one. You just took it from the box before—"

"Before Rex Canuel came in about the pump!" Bob exploded. "Lady, we've got it! Your experiment is right, and so is mine!"

"But they are different!"

"Of course," he said, and he had to fight to keep his voice down. "Mine shows negative because it's from a different batch of water! I poured your sample before Canuel came in! They didn't count on that, and he missed it when he swapped the beakers!"

"Swapped the beakers?" Molly repeated, completely confused. "Who?"

"Wilson, of course," Bob cried. "He's the only other man in the plant at night. He did it while Canuel faked the hot pump and got us out of here!"



"But why?" Molly demanded, catching his excitement but still not following his thought.

"Because they didn't want us to test that water we just took from the press! Because they were running the stuff through without zinc, and they knew I'd find they'd been robbing us blind!"

"Look! If the powdered zinc isn't added to the gold and cyanide solution before it is pumped into the filter-press, the gold will go right on through with the water in a liquid form! There's no precipitation to stop it. All a night-shift crew would have to do is stop that zinc feeder for a few hours every night when nobody was around, switch the valves on the discharge lines so that the stuff would be pumped up into one of the old tanks that we use for storage, and then add the zinc up there to settle the gold to the bottom of the tank! They could collect a fortune on the tank-bottom before they ever had to drain it all out, and make their clean-up!"

Molly's eyes were bright with triumph.

"Oh! Just wait until we tell Dad we've found his gold! He'll—"

"Whoa there!" Bob cautioned. "Maybe we've found it, and maybe not. These boys are smart, and we've got to move easy if we're going to pin it on 'em. Maybe they've already made a clean-up and are just starting on a new tank. If they've done that

and we jump too quick, they can quit, deny the whole thing and we'll never get our gold back."

"All right," Molly agreed. "What do we do now?"

"Well," Bob told her, "the first thing I'm going to do is check those old back tanks and see if there is any gold-bearing water stored there! If there is, it's time enough to go to Hardrock for help."

"This isn't going to be near as much fun as throwing the gold at Dad in a sack," Molly said, disappointed. "But I guess it's the best way. Let's go get those samples."

"You don't go get those samples," Bob told her. "I'm the guy that sneaks in and gets 'em. You go home."

"That's what you think, but you don't think right," Molly said flatly. "It was my test-tube that started this thing, and I'm in it, and I'm going to stay in it!"

BOB had tried arguing with a McGarble before, so he just grinned and kissed her to loosen the set of her mouth.

"That's better," she said. "Much better. Sometimes you act as if you were learning."

He kissed her again to settle that, and then got some small bottles and a flashlight from a drawer. They locked the little outside door, put out the lights over the assay bench and went out into the thundering roar of



*"Guys like you that are too smart
always get into trouble!"*

the stamp-mill. They saw neither Canuel nor Wilson as they went up the stairs by the end battery.

It was still dead-hot outside. Not a breath of air was stirring as they circled around to the upper side of the plant and came in under the shadow of the ore trams.

"You wait here," Bob told Molly. "They'd be twice as apt to see two of us as they would one."

She put her hands out to hold him a moment, and her voice was beginning to be a little frightened.

"Darling—I don't want to be a sissy, but I'm afraid. Suppose they should see you?"

He put an arm around her shoulders and pulled her close.

"They won't see me," he promised. "This is only going to take a minute, because the tank I suspect is a big old one clear up at the back, and it isn't in sight from the lower level."

Molly turned her face up to his and said earnestly: "I wish you'd let me go get Dad. There are two of them in there, and—"

"Quit it," Bob said. "You're just getting yourself wound up, and we don't need anybody else in this yet." He gave her a quick hug and moved away.

He went swiftly up over the trams, cut along the tracks above the feed-bins and came down to the back of the mill by Number Sixteen stamp battery. There was a short stairway that ran

down into the shadows between the upper tanks, and as he went down, the sound of his boots was completely drowned by the steady din of the mill.

There wasn't much light back there, but Bob knew exactly which tank he wanted, and he didn't waste any time. He went through a narrow dark alley, climbed over a set of pipe-lines and cut around a corner. That was as far as he got, because he found the night-crew there and they had everything all wrapped up and waiting for him.

Rex Canuel had an ugly-looking automatic leveled at about six inches above Bob's belt-line, and the sour-faced Wilson was standing just to his left with a sixteen-inch wrench balanced in his right hand. On the floor behind the two Bob saw a coil of compressed-air hose lying by a bucket of powdered zinc, and he knew that he had come at just exactly the wrong time.

There was a little shelter from the stamp-mill's roar down there between the tanks, and Canuel said:

"I could blow your guts out without anybody hearing a thing, so watch yourself!"

Wilson moved forward to run a swift searching hand over him.

"Guys like you that are too smart always get into trouble!" Canuel said. "Lots of trouble."

Bob Weston considered taking a chance with the flashlight as a club, but he knew that was no good, so he shrugged.

"Okay, but I don't see what the hell this is going to buy you. Even if you've got me cornered, you haven't got time to drain this tank and clean up the stuff you've stolen."

"It's going to buy us plenty," Canuel said. "Your damn' snoopy nose has maybe cost us the gold we've settled in the bottom of this tank, but you're going to make that all right for us—you're going to even that up by pulling the lock on the main filter-press."

"You're crazy," Bob told him. "There's a time lock on there, and it wouldn't do any good even if I pulled the combination."

"A sledge will fix that," Canuel said. "Come on—let's go."

Weston had a pretty good idea what was going to happen to him, whether he opened the lock or not, but there wasn't anything he could do right then, so he turned and started out, the muzzle of the automatic making a hard threat against his back.

They went back through the tanks, out onto the long ramp and into the full roar of the crushers; the roar that built a solid wall of sound against any yell or signal for help. It would drown the blows of a sledge against the filter-lock, and it would drown the sound of a shot if Canuel's nervous hand were to slip. That ocean of noise was a trap that killed Bob's every hope;

and he was hating it when his unbelieving ear caught something different in its bellow.

For an instant he thought it was a trick of his nerves; then the pitch changed again, lessened in its all-in-vading tide, and Bob's quick eye gave him the answer. Two of the batteries at the far end were stilled; and even as he looked, the third stopped, and he saw Molly McGarble darting toward the power switch on the motor of the fourth.

She had cut that one and was on to the fifth and sixth before the men behind Bob realized what was going on.

Then Canuel bawled an oath, and the gun-pressure was gone from Bob's back. He swung around savagely, but the other man, Wilson, acted fast. He brought his big wrench down over Rex Canuel's gun-arm, and as the seventh and eighth batteries fell silent, he yelled:

"Damn you, *no!* Do you want to hang?"

Bob squared back and set himself, but Wilson shook his head as he threw his wrench down. The two men just stood there with Canuel on the floor between them, as the rest of the batteries were cut into silence.

IN the strange, empty silence of the dead plant, Canuel writhed and swore, and Wilson said bitterly:

"Shut up and know when you're licked. No noise means an accident in a joint like this, and there'll be twenty men here in two minutes. We aint got a chance to get away, and hanging aint to my taste."

Cutting through the last of his words there came the wailing shriek of a siren from the mine rescue-station across the mill-yard, and in another moment the sound of running feet.

Bob looked at Wilson. He was a little confused about what he ought to say, but the man told him bluntly:

"Skip it. I just aint a sucker, and I know the difference between a soft rap and a tough one. We've only been shoving the stuff through without zinc for about a month, and everything we got is settled in the bottom of that one tank."

Bob said, "Okay," and as the first of the rescue gang began to pour in at the far end of the plant, he started down the ramp toward Molly.

Her face was still pale, but her eyes were very bright, and Bob knew he was going to get the benefit of a reaction if he didn't work fast. He tried to beat her to the punch.

"For a girl that sneaks in against orders, you're mighty smart," he said.

"You're a fool!" Molly cried.

"Sure," he said.

"But I love you anyway."

"Sure," he said again—and took her in his arms.

No Holds Barred

Two football teams of professional wrestlers promote mayhem and matrimony.

by D. J. KING

I SUPPOSE every sport columnist receives letters, telegrams, and telephone calls from his admiring (and otherwise) public, on every subject from Joe Poluka's spitball, to the care and feeding of a baby rhinoceros. I know I do; and I know, too, that there is not one in a hundred of these communications that causes even a ripple in my well-ordered life, or causes me to sit up and lift an eyebrow and exclaim: "Now, that boy's got something!"

Snooks—er, my secretary—goes through my mail every morning and segregates it into three piles. The first and largest pile goes immediately into the waste-basket, and I never see them. The second pile consists of bills, letters from friends or relatives, or routine communications from my various sources of information. The third pile usually contains only three or four letters, and these are the ones which my very efficient secretary considers worth immediate attention; and Snooks—er, my secretary—rarely misses.

In this handful of letters, one morning not long ago, I found a letter which contained only the following:

Dear Milt: One thing I would like to see: a football game played by professional wrestlers, with no holds barred.

Yours truly, M. K. B.

Now, the first thing that struck my eye about this brief note was the fact that it was signed only with initials. That in itself was something unusual. Most contributors sign full names, and expect them to be printed in full, and many suggest that thanks for their contribution, if rendered, might take the form of a substantial check.

While I was musing absently on this, and wondering why Snooks had put this letter in Pile 3, my mind caught up with my eyes, and I sat up straight in my chair and concentrated. I'd been out late the night before, and that's why I hadn't been so keen on the uptake, before. But now I got it, suddenly, and was wide awake. Grunt and groan football! Wow!

Once I saw some mud-wrestling. Ever see it? If you have, you know just how far the promoters will go in

their effort to popularize wrestling. They figure the public will pay to see anything that's revolting, and maybe they're right; on the night I saw that muddy brawl, they packed in a large and enthusiastic house. Strange that no promoter had thought of staging a football game with wrestlers! Why, it was a natural!

The kid came in with Pile 2 while I was picturing this game in my mind's eye.

"Snooks," I said, "a honey of an idea, this wrestler-football thing, huh?"

"I thought you'd like it," she said. "I'd like to see that game myself, and I'm discriminating in my taste for sports!" I told her. "Lou Deering'll put it on—don't worry about that! He's spoiling for a new idea like this, right now! Call him up and find out when I can see him—will you, Snooky?"

Well, I saw Lou about four o'clock that afternoon, and broke the scheme to him over a glass of beer.

"Lou," I said, "how many grapplers you got in your stable—big ones? And tough."

"Oh," Lou says, "about twenty-four or five, right now—eight or nine headliners, and the rest coastin'. Why?"

"I got a idee, Lou," I says. "Not just a idee, this aint, but a Lulul!" I talk like this when I'm with anyone that's connected with either wrestling or boxing. I don't know why, but I never saw a pug or a wrestler that spoke good English: not since Gene Tunney, I mean, nor before him.

"Well," Lou says, wiping the foam off his mouth, "spill it."

"Lou," I says, "I want you to stage a football game."

"What!" Lou turned and looked at me as though he thought I had suddenly lost my mind. "Are you kiddin', Milt? Me put on a football game? You're nuts!"

"Now, Lou, hold your horses," I said. "This football game is to be played by professional wrestlers, with no holds barred! Get it? Ever see a football game, Lou?"

"Yeh, once. Sissy game!"

"Okay! You saw how the referee penalized the players for holding, for

unnecessary roughness, for clipping, and all that, didn't you? You saw 'em playin' nice and fair, and gentlemanly, and bowin' to each other, and helpin' each other up off the field, when they was accidentally knocked down, didn't you? Well, suppose they wasn't no such rules as that; suppose anything went! Suppose, fer instance, that the game was played by a bunch of wrestlers that could take it, and the rule-book was left at home? That wouldn't be a sissy game, would it?"

Lou was silent for a minute, and then he grinned. "I'm beginnin' to like the sound of it, Milt," he said.

"Fine!" I hollered, slapping him on the back. "When do we put it on? We'll rent Hedley Field for the game, and have it played at night! That way, we'll get the football crowd, and the wrestling crowd, too. We'll—"

"Hold on! What d'ya mean, *we*? Who let you in? I'm stagin' the game, if it's staged—and *just me*! You can be publicity man, for five per cent of the gate. That's for thinking it up."

"Ten per cent!"

"Five."

"Okay!" I stuck out a hand. "It's a deal! When do we start?"

"I'll see Hedley about the field to-day, and call you up tonight, so you can beat the deadline for the mornin' papers. The sooner the publicity starts, the better the gate we'll have. And Milt—spread it on thick!"

Well, Lou was true to his word, and called me up about five o'clock.

"All set Milt," he said. "Date's two weeks from next Friday night. Place is Hedley Field, and time, eight-thirty P.M. Prices, seventy-five cents general admission, a dollar reserved. Got it?"

I was flabbergasted. "You mean, you've got all that arranged already?"

"Sure! The gate's practically filin' through the stiles, right now!" he comes back. "Now, get busy on that publicity, and don't spare the printer's ink!"

Lou hung up, then, and I sat there for a minute lost in admiration. Now, there was a guy who did things in a big way! He could tell a good thing right off the bat, and when he found a good idea, he lost no time doing something about it!

Well, I'll spare you the details of the next two weeks preparations, and tell you about the game. There was a swell crowd on hand, and I noticed that at least half of them were of the fair sex. That surprised me a little. I had figured a rough-and-tumble set-to like that would attract mostly men. But I suppose I should have known it. I've seen plenty of lovely ladies at prize fights and wrestling matches glorying in the bloodshed, and screaming "Kill the big bum!" Snooks went along, at my suggestion.

"So you'll see first hand the product of my prodigious mind!" I told her.

The officials in charge of the game were not the usual football linemen and referees, but were a handful of plug-uglies who had orders to see that no one was actually killed, and to break up the riots, after they had reached a sufficiently exciting point. There were just three rules: The ball must be advanced ten yards in four downs, or the opposition got it; the ball must not touch the ground during play, or it was automatically dead; and all fights must break up, and the players get to their places, within ten seconds after the referee's whistle, or a ten-yard penalty would be called.

WELL, those wrestlers knew just enough about football to give the game some semblance of the original sport, but not much. From a football man's viewpoint, the whole thing was a travesty on a fine, clean sport, and should have been stopped by law. Some one—I presume it was Lou—had arranged to have all the ugliest and meanest-looking wrestlers on one side, and the more human-looking ones on the other. Also he had given instructions that the human-looking side was to play a fairly clean game, so far as it was possible, while the gorillas were to play dirty—wrestler-fashion. Thus the villains were identified, and the crowd could cheer lustily when the "goods" made a score. It was good showmanship and crowd-psychology—and Lou was a master at both.

On the first play the quarterback on the side that won the toss, took the ball from center, and started for the goal-line straight ahead. He didn't run around an end—he just started forward, sort of crouched over, following the other backs, who had formed a wedge of interference. Two seconds later there were exactly eleven fights on that field, and the ball-carrier fell on the ground, grounding the ball, and having made two yards. The referee blew his whistle, and the battlers arose and lined up again.

On second down and eight to go, the quarterback did exactly the same thing again, only in a different place—the other tackle. This time he didn't gain an inch. On third down he tried a smash through center, and this time

he shoved his way about six yards, and was downed by the whole opposing team; whereupon his own team piled on to a man, making a kicking, squirming stack about six feet high. Back in line for fourth down, they did not kick, but tried another buck, failed, and the ball changed hands.

Well, that's just about the story of the whole game. The ball changed hands about every minute and a half, with neither side having enough punch to drive to the other's goal line. Not a pass was thrown during the entire game, the players being good only at throwing wrestlers out of rings, and not footballs at goal-lines—to say nothing of catching them. Neither was there any attempt made at end runs. All gains were made through the line, with sheer power, punch, grapple and hold—to say nothing of eye-poke, toe-hold, half Nelson, head-lock and body-scissors. There were even a couple of airplane spins.

In other words, they shot the works, and I say again, it was a good show—if not a football game. At half time, the players sat on the grass and glowered at each other, while the officials stood around between the teams to prevent any dirty work. Even so, a couple of times, while their backs were turned, some of the gorillas sneaked over and assaulted a couple of the human-lookers. All true to the traditional wrestling technique, of course, it was, and the crowd fell for it. Their warning cries to the officials brought those gentlemen on the run to corral the offending villains, and herd them back to their places.

The game finally ended, with no casualties, save a man in one of the back rows who got excited and fell out of his seat, spraining his arm. The players all walked off the field—the original players, there having been no substitutions throughout the game. The "goods" won by pushing the ball over the goal-line for six points, just before the final gun. That was arranged beforehand, of course—probably as a lesson that crime doesn't pay.

On the way out, as Snooks—pardon me, my secretary—and I were pushing our way through the mob, I looked

down at her, and she looked so little and fragile, there in all that crush, that I felt a pang of sympathy for her, and of anger at myself, for letting her in for this. When we could breathe, and hear each other speak, I asked:

"Well, honeybunch, what did you think of it?"

"Not so hot!" she replied.

AT once, I began to defend my brain child. "You mean you consider my idea of no value?"

"Your idea? Humph!" She shrugged with disdain, and walked on in silence.

"Well," I admitted, "of course that M. K. B., or whatever his initials were, did make the first suggestion, but—"

"But you are the brains that developed it, huh? Say, Einstein, you can't even add two and two! Didn't anything strike you as familiar about those initials?"

"M. K. B.? No, can't say that they do . . . Say! That's your initials, isn't it—Mary Katherin Brownell! But—"

"Yes, it was. Me."

"Mary! You mean, you really wanted to see a game like that—you put that letter on my desk, so that I would use my influence to get it staged? But why didn't you just ask me, yourself—in person? I'd—"

"No you wouldn't! You take an idea from me? Never! But from a fan—especially one that didn't sign his name—you could steal with pleasure! Big-hearted Milt—that's you!"

"Aw, listen Snooks!"

We got into a taxi and started out toward home. She leaned over and began fooling with one of the buttons on my coat. In a minute, "Milt," she said, "I've been thinking."

"What, again?" I said, gruffly. "See what happened, last time you tried to think. Let that be a lesson to you."

"Okay!" After a while we got out of the brightly lighted section, and out in the outskirts, where it was mostly shadows. I whispered:

"Like me a little?"

She answered in a tiny voice:

"Mmm—I think so."

A minute later, when I got my breath, I said:

"There you go—thinking again!"



The Iron Rainbow

The showdown in the desperate gamble of the pioneer railroad-builders in Kansas.

by GORDON YOUNG

The Story Thus Far:

YOUNG Jack Harrington of the engineering staff looked up from his field-book that fateful night when the kid rod-man burst in, shouting: "Jack! Rhobb's dead! Fight over at the Empire. Nobody meant to kill him. But that gambler King Collins killed a Texan, and there was a lot of shooting—and Rhobb's dead."

"Yeah!" Harrington said slowly. "How do you know nobody meant it?"

Now that Rhobb, who was superintendent of construction and Jack's friend, was dead, Hallard would have everything his own way here in this little end-of-rail town in Kansas. And Jack had written to his father General Harrington—the president of the road—in Washington, criticising Hallard's management.

The quarrel came to a head soon afterward, and impetuous young Jack resigned. But his letter perhaps bore fruit in Washington, for the General decided to send an under-cover man—Colonel Blade, who had been his chief of scouts during the Civil War—out to railroad to investigate conditions. Moreover another Washington railroad chief, feeble old Senator Fenton, decided to go out and have a look-see for himself, and to take his lovely daughter Allie with him. And therein lay much dynamite. For though Allie had an "understanding" with Jack Harrington, she had been flirting with Royal Weldron, brilliant young scion of the Ganford clan, who hated the Harringtons and were determined to get control of the railroad. And Weldron under the assumed name of Roy Ford was now on his way to this railroad town of Fenton also, in furtherance of the Ganford plot.

Jack Harrington decided to go farther West; and he thought of pretty Molly McVey, who lived in a box-car with a crabbed and often drunken grandfather who got out a newspaper. Go West he would, but not alone.

But Pop McVey said to him: "Don't think that we McVeyes are flattered by the General's son visiting us! Don't ever talk marrying to Molly!"

The town was a jam of men. Sundry newcomers, including that lovable old scoundrel Doc Baron and his train acquaintance Lathrop (in reality General Harrington's under-cover scout Colonel Blade) were watching Belle Menlinton deal faro—Belle, who was secretly the wife of King Collins, and dealt a subtly crooked game. They were watching so closely that she had to let young Harrington win a big jackpot. King Collins provoked a quarrel, but Blade interfered in time to save the boy from the King's deadly derringer—clamped a hand on the gambler's wrist, gave the upstretched arm a wrenching shake, and the ball struck the ceiling. Then Blade brought an open palm up against the King's cheek.

"You've another gun, gambler! Reach for it!" he said. But Collins slunk out, instead.

Blade got possession of the crooked dealer's box Belle had been using and forced her to tell the truth about the railroad situation as she had learned it.

"Let me be sure that I understand, Miss Belle. Roy Ford and Plummer are developing Plummer City. Lots and options going like hot cakes, because the road is going through there. If the road doesn't go there, they would be pretty much lurching, wouldn't they?"

"I'd think so!"

"So if what you have told me is true, they are counting on General Harrington's losing control—just when, Miss Belle?"

"I do not know. Everybody else seems to think that the railroad fight is over—that General Harrington is in full control, and will succeed in keeping it."

"That," said Blade, "is what makes it a big gamble."

The gambler Collins drew his derringer once too often—this time on Doc Baron, who had become mayor of the town. Baron killed him with his huge bowie knife, but his death was used to induce his crony Taggart to talk. So it came out that Rhobb, a blunt man, had suspected Plummer of being at least partly financed by the Ganfords; and he suspected his clerk Ayers, too, of giving Plummer information on company affairs. Rhobb quarreled with Hallard, about Ayers; and he bluntly told people that he meant to have Hallard ousted.

Plummer knew, through Ayers, that Hallard favored the longer road toward the State line as a matter of believing it the best; and since that fell in with the Plummer City plan, the only thing to do was to get rid of Rhobb.

Plummer at first tried to work Collins into killing Rhobb. The cold-blooded Collins liked to kill somebody now and then; and though he would not risk shooting Rhobb, he made suggestions. Ayers had a doglike fidelity toward Hallard, a desperate fear and hate of Rhobb.

Ayers was concealed in the doorway to the dining-room. When Rhobb came in, the gambler, so as to create some confusion, forced a quick quarrel on a half-drunken stranger and shot him. Ayers shot Rhobb from the doorway and ran back through the dark dining-room and away. *(The story continues in detail:)*

THE last cow rattled her long horns against the doorway of the framework on a flat-car, and a bunch of cowboys squatted around a blanket at the camp, as the trail boss counted out their gold. An hour later they stormed into town, the cook with them, yelling like Comanches.

Belle and Allie leaned together from a window, and old Joe wondered, "In de Lawd's name, what's de matteh?"

They swung from their horses, leaving the reins as they fell at the edge of the sidewalk, crowded into the barber-shop, passing a bottle to and fro as they waited. One by one they were sheared and shaved, stamped their high-heeled boots and rattling spurs into the Tip-top where girls waited. The marshal, overconfident in their friendliness toward him, came in to protest that they oughtn't shoot at the ceiling. People had rooms upstairs. They took him out and made him climb a pole, not even going to the



Illustrated by Raymond Sisley

trouble of disarming him first. There he squatted on the edge of a cross-piece at the pole top that held the sign of an eating-place—squatted with two guns on him, and the marshal's badge. They made him take off his badge and toss it down before they would let him down.

The crowd laughed, but some of the older and tougher saloon men looked to their shotguns; and merchants sent word anxiously to Doc Baron, the mayor. The Doc went to Colonel Blade.

"All right," said Blade; "get me a star and swear me in. I don't want those boys shot up! I mean to hire them."

And that was how it happened that Blade, with a deputy marshal's badge on his coat, walked into the Tip-top where only cowboys were on the floor, and frightened girls stepped high, dodging clumsy feet, dodging saw-sharp rowels, and ducking at times as if to dodge bullets. He paused for a moment in the doorway, and could tell that as yet these fellows were not blindly drunk, but were well into the stage of devilish recklessness that might turn mean at any moment.

The musician stopped, but a fiddler went whimpering on for a lonely second, then quit with a startled jerk as if a string had snapped.

"E-eye-oh!" a tall lean Texan yelled. "Here comes another of them star-branded shypokes!" But the girl jerked at his arm, and begged: "Don't, Tex! Don't! He'll kill you sure! That's Blade—the rider!" There was more in her voice than the words that gave them warning.

As Blade came across the floor, men moved up toward the tall Texan, but Betty stepped back and back, with her shoulders huddled wincingly. A boy started by her with stumbling thump of high heels, and Betty snatched out, caught his shoulder. "Keep away from him!"

"He a friend of yours?"

"No! But I know him!"

Blade did not hurry; he didn't frown and he didn't smile; and he went straight for the tall lean fellow who had called him a "star-branded shypoke." He was walking up as he said, clearly enough to be heard throughout the big room:

"You boys can make all the noise you want, but don't do it with guns—not in town." That brought him face to face, and within arm's-reach of the tall Tex, and Blade stopped there and added: "Just turn them in to the bartenders here. Pick them up when you ride out. Then go on with your hell-raising!"

Tex scowled. All eyes were on him and he knew it; and he had pride and liquor enough to have to talk back. "I don't give up my gun to no man!" He wagged his head to show how much he meant it, then, more loudly: "If you want my gun off—take it off me!"

Without a word or move that foretold what was coming, Blade struck instantly with a straight-arm reach, the fingers extended stiffly, the thumb spread wide; and the web of

his hand hit Tex's throat with a jar that knocked his Adam's apple back like a gag that was meant to strangle a man; and as Blade struck, his fingers closed; then, with the quickness of one who had done it before, he snatched left-handedly at the holster, drew Tex's gun, and gave him a shove that sent him staggering back, gulping hoarsely and clutching at his throat for breath.

Blade held Tex's gun hip-high and barrel-straight, and glanced from face to face. "Anybody else want his gun taken off for him?" No answer; no sound except the gasping of Tex as his fingers struggled at his own throat.

Betty gave the boy she was holding a shove toward the bar, with, "Go do like he told you!" Blade turned toward the bar himself, turning his back to them, and holding the gun by the barrel, extended it butt-first to a bartender.

"Let him have it any time he wants it," said Blade. And the cowboys who heard that, knew just what he meant: if Tex had any fault to find at being taken at his word, he could call for his gun and try again.

Blade stood and watched as the boys came up, some grinning, and some with a sheepish look, and put their guns on the bar. Then a young fellow who had a lean hungry hardness as if he were built out of rawhide and greasewood, said to Blade, with the softness of a south-born Texan:

"'Twas you come down to camp to hire some of us to ride for this railroad. That job still open?"

"Yes."

"You've hired yoreself a feller, Mister! When do I go to work?"

Blade put out his hand. "You're on the pay-roll now. Go on with your fun!"

And that was how Blade hired the whole outfit, cook and Tex too. He reported to the General: "Just boys—the oldest, excepting the cook, is twenty-eight—of the same breed that gave us hell during the War. Am arming them with Henry rifles—introduced them, one by one, to Miss Fenton—her railroad, they think!—and her companion Miss Menlinton. . . . When a Texan thinks he is fighting for a woman, they don't grow men big enough to lick him."

ALLIE FENTON saw Colonel Blade alone, and asked tensely: "You hate me, don't you, Colonel Blade?"
"No. It isn't hate, Miss Fenton."
"You don't trust me?"
"No."

Which was the only time in her life a man had ever spoken like that to her when she coaxed. She was used to being admired as a pet kitten is to having its fur rubbed, but she set her small face impassively and gazed without showing the hurt. Her sharp little teeth came edge to edge for one more question. "You think I am like *that*?"

And he said, "Yes," quietly.

Allie, without the least sign of emotion, watched him leave the room; and he thought that she was harder than the china her face resembled.

An hour later Miss Belle swept in upon him, her gypsy-like face flushed with reckless anger. "What have you done to that child? She's crying her eyes out! You've beat her worse than Weldron! You men! She was a little fool and knows it! We can't all be so wise and cunning as Colonel Blade—who *never* makes a mistake! Oh, I could kill you!" said Miss Belle. "Whether you beat a woman with your tongue or a whip, what does it matter? You're no better than Weldron! You lie and cheat to get what you want! And you're just as cruel and mean!"

Then out she went and slammed the door; and Blade stood thoughtfully rubbing a finger back and forth across his chin as various thoughts skittered around in his mind. Miss Belle was an amazingly good-looking woman when she was mad. The sarcasm of "who *never* makes a mistake!" drew blood; and comparing him to Weldron had a sting that made his smile look wry. He nodded a little, said to himself: "Damned if I don't like *her*!"

OLD Joe bowed and grinned and shook hands with Jack Harrington, told him he "sho'" looked fine, which was true, except that he was nervous. He wore new boots, had a new hat, new trousers, a new shirt, was shaved and trimmed. "Will Miss Allie see me?"

"Ah 'spect so. Yo' set yo'self down."

He sat down with burly slowness, fiddled thoughtfully with his hat, now half-smiling and now with a look of solemn uneasiness. Minutes went by, and he turned his head with a listening tilt, and waited, kept on waiting.

Allie pushed at Miss Belle's fluttering hands. "I don't want to look pretty! I want to look plain, as *plain* as I can! I'm tired of being liked because of bows and curls and things like"—Allie flung the earrings to the dresser—"this! And why hasn't he been near me before? He has been in town! That Colonel Blade has told him—I know he has!"

Miss Belle's fierce affection for Allie was like that of a mother hawk for her lone fledgling. She knew what the girl had meant when she talked of Jack and said that she never wanted to see him again; and Belle spoke up for him with the liking that she honestly felt, because it gave Allie pleasure to talk of him, even unforgivingly.

"Aren't you coming too?"

"No," said Miss Belle, with a sudden hug. "And I'm not going to put my ear to the keyhole, either! I am going out. So just be at ease, darling!"

Allie went in with demure coolness, politely said, "How do you do, Jack?" and gave him a listless hand. His broad expectant grin died like a candle in the wind. "Sit down, Jack," she told him, and sat down herself, not close by.

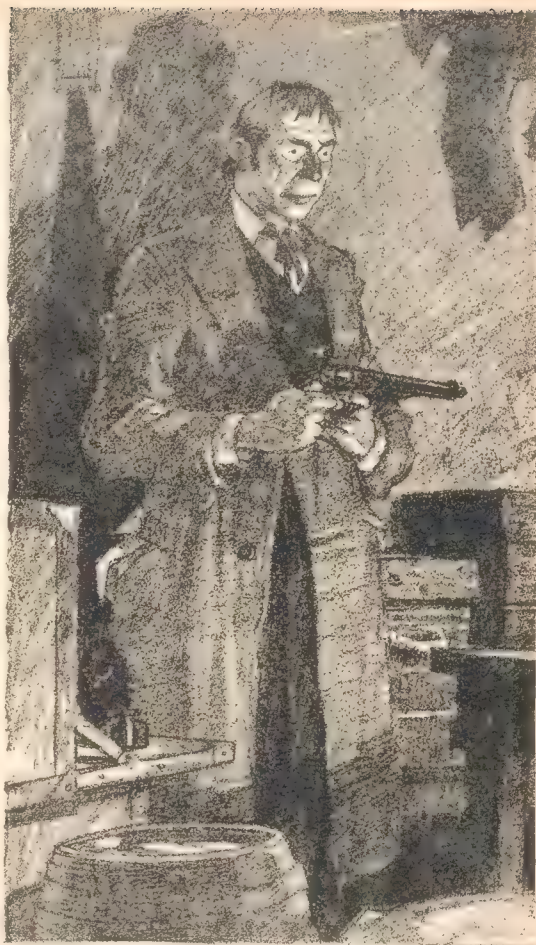
He stood awkwardly unhappy, staring at her.

"How have you been, Jack?" He was big, with the hand-someness of strength in his face; and his very awkwardness seemed admirable.

He sat down. "Maybe you've wondered why—why I haven't been to see you before, Allie." He mumbled: "I ought've—the Senator—and all—but—"

"Why didn't you?"

"Allie, you don't know about me. I've been a fool. About the time you came out here, I'd got mad, had a



quarrel with Hallard—Mr. Hallard, I mean—and quit the road. Then I got in that fight, and my face—I didn't want you to see me. Then I did see you. That made me feel worse." He dragged the words out: "You were pretty." Then, more easily: "You're prettier now than I have ever seen you!"

"Thank you, Jack." She might have been acknowledging the return of a handkerchief she had dropped.

He went on with labored explaining: "All my fault about Mr. Hallard. . . . I went out with the graders. . . . I knew how the General would feel, but—Colonel Blade came out and gave me hell. . . . I came in and apologized to Mr. Hallard. . . . I didn't want to come near you again until I was back, doing something—I didn't want to have to be ashamed. . . . Yesterday Mr. Hallard sent for me. I'm going out on a division beyond Soote as assistant to the engineer!" Pride got into his voice and widened his smile. "I bought some new clothes and came to see you!"

And all that Allie replied was, "I am awfully glad, Jack," with a coolly pleased smile. "I know you'll succeed. I am glad you came to tell me good-by."

He was confused and hurt, but he was not angry, and he did not say or do anything unkind. He smiled his best, and his "Good-by, Allie," was as if he knew that his dismissal was final and deserved.

When he had gone, Allie ran to a mirror. "Prettier now than I have ever seen you," he had said. She was paying



Blade said: "Do you think Weldron will keep his promise of a thousand for shooting me, Ayers?"

them back, these men that had hurt her so. No one of them would ever hurt her again, ever! But he was gone, this big honest awkward boy who had come with pride to tell her. Allie clenched her fingers together and set her teeth, and said, "I'm *not* sorry!" She walked about the room nervously, wanting Miss Belle to come; and when Miss Belle did come, Allie went into her arms with the cry of: "Oh, why did I do it! Why did I do it to *him*?"

THE railroad began to move. Trains rolled in with double-headers tugging at them. Flat-cars went onto the siding, where carpenters put on frames for cattle shipment, for other herds were in.

Once again the fever of track-laying took hold of men—and women. They looked ahead to the next end-of-track town, and payday. Bridge gangs had moved out with their piling on wagon-wheels, oxen-drawn, carrying their pound-age bolts and spikes. Tie-haulers came up from the wood-cutters' camps, laying their piles by the grade-side under the noses of inspectors. The material-yard twinkled with lanterns all through the night as men heaved to fill the empties.

Any time Grogan returned to Fenton City he knew where to find Mr. Hallard: in his office. The greeting was always

the same these days. "Too slow, Grogan! The material is in. Why don't your foremen get it down, Grogan?"

"Always some slack the first few miles, Mr. Hallard."

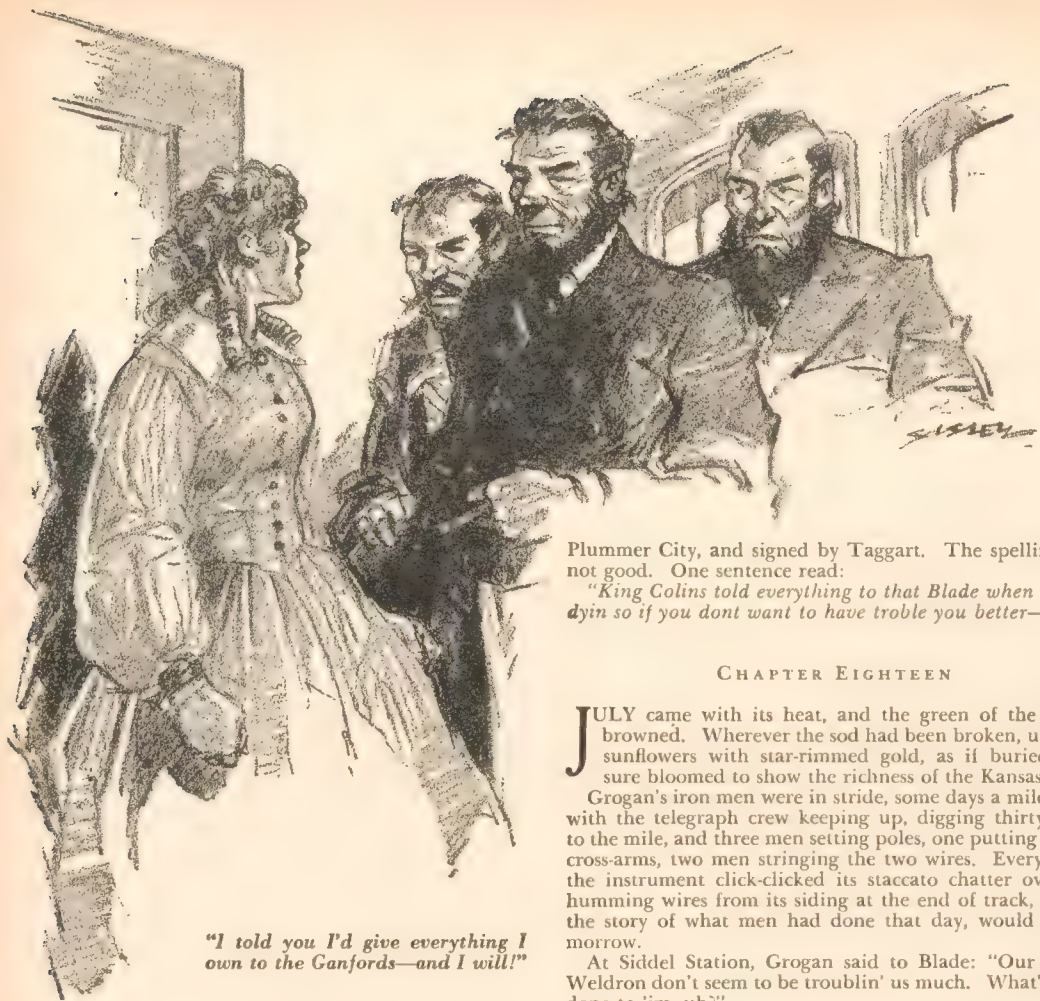
Hallard's eyes were brighter, deeper. Grogan dreaded their look; there was something too bright. The nearest to a smile that Grogan had seen was when he told Hallard what Winch Wilson reported of the latest Indian raid. They struck as usual in the dawn, trying to stampede the stock, rode into the fire of magazine rifles, rode out with the Texans trying to ride them down. Blade's "shypokes," as they called themselves, brought back seven ponies. There had been Indians on the ponies when the fight started. The cavalry detail hadn't got mounted until the Indians were a mile away. "And the Colonel wasn't even with them!"

"Yes," said Hallard, "it was a mistake—a brilliant mistake if you like, but a mistake—to make those people put up that bond. They will fight us that much harder."

"That town of Plummer is quite a place now." Grogan did not add that he had heard outlaws and bad-men were welcomed, almost sought for.

"Plummer has had everything moved that he could move. What's left of his business here he has sold out, or pretended to sell. Even," asked Hallard, "if he was closely involved with Weldron, why is he afraid to return here? It's no crime to be associated with business rivals, Grogan. What was the matter with Plummer?"

Grogan said: "Uh."



"I told you I'd give everything I own to the Ganfords—and I will!"

Later he talked with Ayers, gruffly anxious; but Ayers shook his drooping bald head, smiled with loose-lipped weariness. "It will kill him, Mr. Grogan, sir, if the road doesn't go through. He doesn't eat; he drinks coffee; he can't sleep. And," Ayers added with a smug simper that made Grogan feel like squirming, "when he can't sleep, he prays." Ayers rolled his eyes toward the ceiling, and Grogan said: "Uh."

"Do you think, Mr. Grogan, sir, that the road could be completed if anything happened to Mr. Hallard?"

"No," said Grogan.

"Mr. Grogan," Ayers asked with his oozy humility, "Colonel Blade is a most remarkable person, isn't he?"

"Uh-huh," said Grogan.

"The right always triumphs, doesn't it, sir?" Ayers twisted his chicken-scrawny neck, looked toward the closed door of Mr. Hallard's office.

Grogan left the room. It was late, yet two clerks besides Ayers were still in the room. Ayers sat listening to the slow plod of Grogan's feet descending the hollow stairs.

Then he glanced with seeming casualness at the clerks, and drew a letter from under the bottom of papers, opened it with furtive quickness and read the thing again, though he knew it almost by heart. It had come the day before, being delivered by a shaggy unwashed fellow. It was from

Plummer City, and signed by Taggart. The spelling was not good. One sentence read:

"King Colins told everything to that Blade when he was dyin so if you dont want to have troble you better—"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

JULY came with its heat, and the green of the plains browned. Wherever the sod had been broken, up grew sunflowers with star-rimmed gold, as if buried treasure bloomed to show the richness of the Kansas earth.

Grogan's iron men were in stride, some days a mile a day with the telegraph crew keeping up, digging thirty holes to the mile, and three men setting poles, one putting on the cross-arms, two men stringing the two wires. Every night the instrument click-clicked its staccato chatter over the humming wires from its siding at the end of track, telling the story of what men had done that day, would do tomorrow.

At Siddel Station, Grogan said to Blade: "Our friend Weldron don't seem to be troublin' us much. What've you done to 'im, uh?"

Blade scowled. He was a tired man. "Grogan, I'm scared!" Just that, and truth. Graders were already in the wild wide-open Plummer City; Winch Wilson's camps beyond, making their "hump" for the State line. But graders were not track-layers, and the iron had to be within the city's platted limits and down, ten miles of it, before the road could claim its guarantee out of the New York bank's escrow.

Grogan said, "Uh?" inquiringly.

"I expected him to make a move long before this. Then we could strike back."

"He's got his greyhounds, and horses over there, an' women too, I hear. Maybe he won't fight, Colonel."

"Maybe the devil bathes in holy water, too!" The rasp in his voice made Grogan stare, and walk away.

"Who *never* makes a mistake!" came echoing back to Blade's ears many a sleepless night, for he had guessed wrong and knew it. He had expected that Weldron would have sent out trouble-makers, night-riders to burn trestles and wreck trains, delay, hold back, beat the road. The nearer the road was to Plummer City, the richer would be the Ganfords' loot when they broke and seized it.

Hallard was up at Siddel on a tour of inspection. Men said that he carried a telegraph-instrument in his pocket; they knew he carried the weight of the road in his head.

He was crazy, some said, but with a most admirable madness of efficient overwork. A one-line road; yet he kept cattle rolling out of Fenton City, material and freight shipments coming in with his schedule and sidings—and supervised the construction ahead. General Harrington was soon coming West—to see the road go into Plummer City.

Night came. The track-layers stuffed their bellies and swarmed out of the boarding-cars for a turn through the town as if the day's work had not tired them enough for sleep, so they must throw away time and strength in the whisky and gambling tents. But some, the older and wiser, trailed off down to Pop McVey's car. Grogan, partly out of goodness of heart, but probably more from shrewdness, had put Pop's box-car on trucks and kept it at the end of track. That pleased Pop, pleased Molly, pleased the men.

Blade turned away from the crooked street. His tent was across the track, some distance from the rails, under cottonwoods that had long ago found water—and so with leafy signals had informed the engineers that this would be an easy place to put down wells. He could smell and hear the teamsters' horses in the wagon-yard near by, where they fed through the night from the haycutters' ricks.

Blade put a candle on the box by the cot, unslung his belt, dropping the holstered revolver on the cot. He put a camp chair to the pine table, which was steadied by having its legs driven into the ground, smoked a cigarette. It seemed to him that he had done just about everything he could by way of preparation, even to sending Ned Patton, as well as some friendly cowboys, into Plummer City as spies. They reported the town hell-wide and plenty bad....

Blade looked up; Ayers was standing at the open tent-flap, hatless, a leveled revolver in both hands. He was in stocking feet, and had lurked at the tent-side for Blade's return, then moved up noiselessly to the open flap. The small pine table with its legs in the ground was between them, and the distance was some seven or eight feet. There was no chance to reach Ayers with a jump, no chance to swing a hand at the candle. Even blindfolded, Ayers could scarcely have missed.

Blade said: "Do you think Weldron will keep his promise, Ayers?"

"What promise, sir?" Ayers' voice was a little breathless. "The promise of a thousand or so for shooting me!"

Ayers' loose lips worked back and forth, and did not say anything until after he had shaken his head a little.

"You know, Colonel, sir, that I killed Mr. Rhobb!"

"So that's it!"

"You," Ayers went on in a sorrowing whimper, "have let me alone because Mr. Hallard needs me. Haven't you, sir?"

"Yes," said Blade.

"The road is nearing completion, sir."

Blade studied the man, decided that he was not crazy but cunning; knew that he was, moreover, a clerical wizard. "All right, Ayers, what kind of bargain do you want to make?"

"But could I trust you, sir?"

"As long as you've got that gun pointed at my head, I'll lie like hell. What's more, somebody may come along, see you, and put a bullet in your back. And Hallard's going to need you for quite a while—yet."

Ayers started to glance behind him, but did not. He looked troubled. The gun was heavy in his hands. "But I am no match for you, Colonel. I am not a fighting man, sir. And—and I admire you, very much, sir; but—I killed Rhobb to save Mr. Hallard's life!"

"You did, really?" Blade seemed ready to be convinced. Encouragingly, "Rhobb was planning to kill Mr. Hallard?"

"He would have killed Mr. Hallard with lies and disgrace. He was jealous of him and hated him, sir."

"Put that gun away and sit down, Ayers. If it's Hallard you are thinking of, you don't want to shoot me until after the road's through Plummer City. And I'm in the same fix with regard to you." The gun started to wobble down, but Ayers jerked it up again, defensively.

So Blade went on talking: "I feel toward the General just about as you feel toward Hallard. The road has to go through! We're agreed on that, aren't we?"

"Yes sir, b-but—you can get the best of me."

"So you meant to shoot me tonight, but changed your mind—at least momentarily?"

"Yes sir." Ayers even bowed politely. "Will you give me your promise, sir? I don't want to—to—" Ayers lowered the gun slightly. He looked unhappy, pathetic.

"What kind of a promise?"

"That you will never do anything to me because of—of what Mr. Collins confessed when he was dying?"

"That wouldn't protect you very much, Ayers. Other people know about it."

"Who, sir?"

"Taggart and Plummer are enough, aren't they? They're not your friends. They've put you up to shooting me, as it is, haven't they?"

"Yes sir."

"They don't give a damn about your neck! And if you'll put that gun down, I'll tell you something."

"B-but why do you want me to disarm myself, sir?" A slither of suspicion ran through his slow whisper.

Blade told him: "Because I want you to believe it!"

Ayers, in a deferential, hesitating, sly-smiling way, said: "But Colonel, sir, if I do believe you, and—and go away, trusting you, you can always do what you want to do to me. My neck is in a noose that you hold in your hands, sir."

"That's right too, Ayers. All right, this is it: Rhobb's dead and the road has to go on. Knowing Hallard now as I do, I believe it would just about have killed him if Rhobb had had his way. I don't know, but I believe, that Rhobb was pretty unscrupulous when he wanted his way. So the main thing I've got against what you did, is the way you did it. If you had walked up to Rhobb, slapped his face, told him why you did it, then shot him—don't you see?"

A sickened smile crept all over Ayers' loose face. "If Rhobb! How could I do—that?"

"You're right again," Blade admitted. "So you win. I don't care how many men have been killed, or why. This road's got to go through!"

"But after it is completed, sir? What then, Colonel, sir?"

"All right, Ayers, I'll tell you something else: I don't know that you killed Rhobb! That gambler was dead before I saw him. I bluffed Taggart into thinking he had told me things. You say you shot Rhobb? For all I know, you're lying. Lots of fellows lie about whom they've shot. And I wouldn't take Taggart or Plummer's word for anything I didn't want to believe. And I'm not going to trick you into completing the road, then hang you!"

Ayers studied a long time in the vague candlelight. "Yes sir, Yes sir, I believe you, Colonel, sir." He bobbed his head humbly and backed away, fading into the deep shadows of the cottonwoods.

Out of a long and thoughtful study, Blade said: "I'll be damned!" Then: "I will be damned if the General ever learns! And that fellow surely got the best of me. Maybe made a fool of me, for all I know—yet. Weldron too!"

Memory of Miss Belle came up out of his thoughts, gypsy-like and with the beauty of anger on her haggard face. Her words returned to him: "Who *never* makes a mistake!"

Hallard and Ayers returned next day to Fenton City.

BLADE sat on the tail of the water-wagon, and Molly fed his horse sugar and flirted, without knowing she was flirting, with the water-boy who dipped buckets into the barrels and gave them to other boys to carry among the iron gang. Oatmeal had been stirred into the water barrels. Oatmeal water was supposed to keep an overheated man from getting water-logged and bloated.

Blade listened to the boy and girl chaffing each other and watched the track-layers. "Iron men," they were called; iron men they were in more ways than merely handling iron. Every morning a construction-train with material

for the day's work was up at end of track. Men sweated through the night at the material-yards, making sure that it would be. Ties were thrown from this train, loaded onto wagons, hauled forward by teamsters, put in place along the grade. Two thousand, seven hundred ties to the mile, rough-hewed and full of splinters, handled and re-handled.

Behind the tie men, rails were being drawn from the construction-train car and placed on a low "track-layer," or iron-car, with fish-plates, bolts and spikes. Down went two rails, always just ahead of the iron car, carried there by men who dropped them at the foreman's word. Instantly other men jumped to half-bolt the joints and quarter-spike the rails—just enough to hold the iron steady and in place, as brawny shoulders huddled in a push at the iron-car, sending it forward over the freshly laid rails with "heave-ho!" grunts; and again rails were drawn off by the men, carried forward on the run, dropped at the foreman's word—and so on, and on and on.

Behind the advancing line another iron-car was being loaded with rails, splices, bolts, spikes; and the first iron-car, when empty, was thrown from the track and the second came up, sometimes horse-drawn, sometimes pushed ahead by men; and when the distance of rails stretched far out ahead, the train itself moved slowly forward, and men with spike-mauls came behind, finished the spiking, tightened bolts. Ten spikes to a rail, four hundred rails to a mile. The boarding-cars were kept to the train so the men could eat at noon, wherever they were; and when the day's work was done, the train hauled back to the first siding, the boarding-cars were left there, and the engine took the empties away to the material-yard and came back through the night with a trainload for the next day's work. And the end-of-track telegraph instrument chattered away with ague-like click of teeth over the wires that men had strung from pole to pole.

Old Pop McVey came up, small as a starved monkey, and peered through his spectacles at the grinning water-boy, looked at Molly. She, who laughed without shyness at any man, was half shy now.

"What's wrong with the world today, Pop?" Blade asked.

The old man rubbed his chin. "Something, my Colonel, seems wrong, and with our road, at that."

"How so, Pop?"

"Word's come through that its stock is falling back East, just when we here at end of track think all is well, and soon to be better."

"What the hell?" Blade asked.

Pop gazed at his inky hand absently, shook his head. "I know but next to nothing about the stock-market, but it seems that gamblers back East are betting we won't win."

"So that's it?" Blade tightened his eyes at nothing, uneasily wondering. "Where's Grogan?"

"He's gone back to Soote River."

From a hundred yards up the track a foreman roared: "Wake up, you! The water-wagon!" The boy jumped for the reins, shook the sleepy horses into a trot that sloshed water from the full barrels, rattled the empties.

Blade slid from the wagon's tail and told Molly: "That's the way of the world, Little Lady!"

Molly smiled quizzically, afraid to ask what he meant. He got into the saddle and trotted slowly beyond the tracks to where his men were camped. . . .

That night a teamster rode out on a mule, was nearly shot by the man on guard, then bellowed loudly for Colonel Blade. Soon the teamster stood in the candlelight, bearded and shaking his head. "I told you all I know, Colonel. You had to be fetched, they said. They said orders come from Hallard to stop work and for you to come." The fellow guessed helpfully: "Road's out o' money, mebbe!"

"Money, hell! With a half-million dollars six weeks away?"

It was after midnight when Blade, and the youth called Al, who looked as if he were built of rawhide and greasewood, and had been brought along in case a messenger was

needed, reached the end-of-track siding. The camp was astir with sleep-tousled men who had piled out of bunks and out of wagon-beds to huddle, wondering about the telegrapher's car.

Old Pop McVey stood in lantern-light, shaking his head and saying over and over to men: "Boys, there's no word come to tell us what or why. Mr. Hallard has said, 'Stop work till further orders.'"

With Al on his flank, Blade clattered up, jumped off, ran up the steps into the telegrapher's car; and men surged in behind, crowding the doorway to see and hear.

"What is it, Pop?"

Pop shook his head, wagged a hand, and followed at Blade's side as he stepped to the young telegrapher. "Colonel, I just don't know. Here it is. 'Stop work until further orders.' And you are to go to Fenton City. There's an engine on its way up from Soote to take you down to Little Water. There you take the material-train back to Fenton."

"Can you get through to Hallard?"

"I can try, Colonel."

"He must be crazy!" Blade exclaimed, remembering Hallard's too-bright eyes. "I don't want to seem to be trying to give him orders, but the work on this road can't be stopped without orders from the General!"

The jam of men in the doorway nodded in a chorus of oaths that approved; and voices lifted to tell men outside how it was, and men outside cheered.

"Put it this way," said Blade. "Tell Hallard I'm here, and that I am asking if that order has come through from General Harrington."

The telegrapher stood up to his instrument, click-clicked away, paused, click-clicked again, calling. After a time there was an answering chatter; the telegrapher looked up at Blade. "Mr. Hallard is not there. Mr. Ayers is."

"Ask him, then!"

In a moment the answer began to come. The telegrapher watched Blade and listened; then he spoke with interpolative readiness as he listened:

"You are to come at once—the order was given by General Harrington. He is—at Fenton City."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

COLONEL BLADE dropped from the train in the yard and ran to the siding where the private car stood.

It was the same in which the Senator and Allie had come West, and now had brought out the General. As Blade went in, a clerk he did not know stopped him, with: "Who are you, sir?"

"Blade."

"Oh, yes, yes; but you can't see the General now. He has been up all night and is sleeping, sir."

Blade said, "You're a fool!" and pushed by the man. He went through the car and knocked on a door.

The General's voice called, gruffly sharp: "Who is it?"

"Blade."

"Come in, Blade."

He went in. The General sat up in the narrow bed, instantly wide awake. A powerful, thick-bodied man with a stiff bristly beard, and tired steady bold eyes. He did not say, "How do you do?" or offer his hand. He picked up a cigar and said, "Match?" Blade found a match, struck it, and the General took it from his hand to light the cigar. Blade stood silently. He knew better than to ask questions.

The General fixed his eyes about two feet above Blade's head and said: "Blade, when the Union Pacific was being built—" He stopped, characteristically, seeming to look back over what he had said to make sure that it was what he meant; then: "Tom Durant, chairman of the board or something, was kidnapped at Green River by contractors—held for ransom—contractors threatened to ruin the road. Ames, Oliver Ames, was president of the Union Pacific then. General Dodge—chief engineer—was in Salt Lake.

He telegraphed Ames for a million dollars. One million! Ames wired one million dollars. Men were paid off. The road went on."

Then the General lowered his eyes, put them on Blade's face. "That is where the Ganfords got their idea! A half-million, they want!"

"Your men, General, are not dissatisfied."

The General pulled the cigar from his mouth, stared at Blade, pointed the cigar at him. "Don't you know what has happened?"

"No sir. Work was ordered stopped. I was called here."

The General made a gruff vague sound; then, slow and calmly: "Engineer Davids and his whole party—that means Jack too—had gone around Plummer City and beyond. They were kidnaped—nearly a week ago. You know the price—you know the men who are making it."

The General did not put it into words, but with his eyes he told Blade: "I did not think you would let this happen to me!" Blade took it, standing straight, without trying a word of explanation. He had not known that the engineer's party had planned any such fool thing; otherwise they would have had an escort. They had probably thought, if they thought at all, that Winch Wilson's graders were protection enough. You didn't report reasons for failure to the General unless he asked for them; now he asked nothing. And Blade could not say that all this time, since the new construction started, he had been intending to do just that to Royal Weldron if he started to make trouble for the road: Go right into Plummer City and kidnap him, hold him as a prisoner of war.

Now Blade had to stand as if in the midst of a fire, and could not—would not—offer a defensive word.

"They have outplanned us, Blade. They knew it was going to happen—before it did happen. Two or three weeks ago they started pounding down our stock." The General studied his cigar, stared at Blade again. "I am glad you're not fool enough to say they wouldn't dare harm those men!" One of "those men" was his own son, but the General ignored that. "What they want, of course, is for us to stop work and negotiate until it's too late to get into Plummer City. And go on. Law doesn't reach this far. Any suits we might start afterward to recover, we are beaten before we start. 'Suits!' Harrington snorted, with a military man's contempt for the word-wrangling of lawyers.

The General got up, slipped into his trousers, put his feet into slippers. The cigar had gone out. He took another match from Blade, and held the cigar carefully in relighting it, so as not to singe his whiskers. For a time he shuffled a step or two, back and forth, in the small compartment. Blade pressed erectly against the partition, making way. Then the General sat down heavily.

"Blade?"

"Yes, General."

"Hallard says, 'Stop work.' Grogan says, 'Stop work.' That means ruin for us—for hundreds of people! This is war, Blade. In war people get hurt—killed. If your own son goes into a battle, you don't wave a flag of truce to keep him from being killed. I want to say, 'Go on!'" Pause. "We lose the road if I do."

The General stared thoughtfully at the toe of a slipper. There was nothing broken, weak or even shaken about him. He was solid and stubborn. He said, "Allie," in a peculiar voice. Then he roused himself, looked at the cigar-stub, pitched it at the cuspidor and pointed. "Hand me another, Blade." Then: "I suppose you have guessed that the Ganfords haven't identified themselves in any way with this—plot? They are too smart for that!" He looked at Blade. "Not even Weldron's name is mentioned. Understand what that means?"

"That, presumably, a gang of outlaws have had this kidnaping idea. If anything does happen to Jack, and the others, the Ganfords can appear as sorrowful and indignant as anybody. But they have let you understand what is behind the demand for—a half-million, you say?"



"Please don't make me break it over your head."

"What they want, Blade, and what they expect, is that the construction-work stops."

"Where are the men being held prisoners, General?"

"Nobody knows. The whole plan has been carefully thought out. Good strategy," he admitted, as impersonally as if discussing Hannibal's crossing of the Alps.

A tapping came on the door, and the clerk called through: "Miss Fenton is here, General, sir."

"Blade, go out and talk to her while I dress."

Allie Fenton was in the car parlor with Miss Belle, and looked directly at Blade without a sign of recognition. He said, "The General is dressing," and Allie turned her face to the window. The small face was no longer quite like Dresden; tan and windburn had made it bisque. The waist she wore was plain, without a furbelow, the only ornament a row of buttons down the front.

Belle spoke tensely but with friendliness: "Terrible!" Blade braced himself for her reproach, but none came. "What *can* be done?" she asked. Blade met her dark eyes and shook his head. "Weldron, of course!" said Belle, and he nodded. She said: "The Doc is outside. Come on out."

She led the way out to the rear platform, then turned quickly to Blade. "That child! Do you know what she's done?" Belle's look brightened with excitement. "You knew she loves Jack?"

Blade withheld the statement that he did not think she loved anybody but herself.

"That little thing in there—no bigger than a minutel! Looks like a doll! She stood up to the General last night and told him that if he tried to go on with the railroad, that she would *give* all the stock her father left her to the Ganfords! She won't have Jack's life endangered! That," said Miss Belle with a thrilled tone ringing the words, "is how some women love!"

Blade rolled a cigarette, watching his fingers.

"He wants to go on with it!" she exclaimed, as if the thing were incredible. Blade did not look up or reply. Belle's hand went out his arm, shook the arm, spilled tobacco from the paper. "What are you going to do, Colonel Blade?" Even the question did not have reproach in it; and when he met her eyes, Blade saw that she believed in him, and was asking out of hope and confidence.

Blade said: "I don't know—yet."

"But you will do something. You *must* do something! You have to! You know Jack and those other men will be—nobody will ever see them alive again! And no matter what's done after that—no matter who is punished—what good will that do? Do *her*? The Doc doesn't think they will ever be released. Not even if the road stops. Not even if the money itself was paid!"

"Why does he think that?"

"Because those fellows are afraid of *you*! He says that after Jack and the other people are released, that you—that Weldron knows that you would hunt them down, and make them talk and so—well, don't you see? Then you would catch him. And he's afraid of *you*, the Doc says."

"Where is the Doc?"

"I don't know," Belle replied, looking over the railing and along the side of the car. "He came with us, but—there is Mr. Grogan and Mr. Hallard. They were all to meet here at noon. That is why Allie came." Belle added, with dislike, "And that man Ayers. I can't stand him!" She came close to Blade; the brightness of her dark eyes softened. "It's hell, isn't it—for you?" Then, looking through the door window: "And for her! She knows what love means—now." Belle touched his arm, asking him to look at her. He did. "It is giving anything, everything! She is willing,"—Miss Belle added ecstatically,—"*and* Jack is one man that's worth it!" Slowly: "I think Allie Fenton is the finest woman I ever knew!"

BLADE looked at her, silent and keeping thoughts from the surface of his face; thinking: "That, from a card-woman who's cheated every man that has come near her!"

Belle said: "I know what you are thinking."

"What, Miss Belle?"

"You feel ashamed because you misjudged Allie, don't you? But you can't understand. They, her father, her friends, kept her—oh, out of kindness, I'll admit—almost like a prisoner, and she played with toys she had, ribbons, jewels, men's hearts—yes, and their lips! What of it?" said Miss Belle, scornfully. "A woman has to learn. Learn what she wants. Learn what to want! Usually she never

learns until too late. Allie did, and I'll tell you she's *glad* to throw it all away for Jack—the road, her own fortune, everything! Don't you know," Miss Belle asked earnestly, "there is something about a woman that makes her glad to suffer if she does it for the man she loves?"

And Blade said: "No. I didn't know."

Miss Belle drew up her head, then smiled a bit and shook her head. "You men don't know much!"

HALLARD and Grogan had entered the car. They spoke to Allie, and Grogan shook her hand, gently. The General came in, then Miss Belle, and Blade, who remained standing near the door. Grogan nodded from across the car, and his look lingered as if remembering something Blade had once said. Blade accepted the stare without flinching and waited, but Grogan in a heavy slow voice told him: "Spilt milk, Colonel. Spilt milk." Grogan, chief contractor, would lose a fortune. "Spilt milk," he said.

Hallard crossed the car to meet the General and shake hands. Neither spoke. There was something nearly ministerial in Hallard's black-coated form, thin bearded face, and the feverish brightness of his eyes could well have passed for religious fervor. He looked very like one who was present to perform the burial service. Blade thought: "He'll break, after this!"

The General sat down in a chair that fitted his burly form. "Gentlemen," he said but looked straight at Allie. Blade had seen strong brave men grow weak-kneed before that look. Her small tanned face met it without a quiver. "I think the road ought to go on."

The General waited. Grogan gazed at the General's feet. Hallard had his head up, put his hand before his face, covering his eyes. Allie tightened her mouth and continued to look directly at the General.

"Gentlemen, honorable men never yield to what is wrong. We are under obligation to hundreds of people, thousands—to complete this road. We call it our road, because some of us control its shares. And I must tell you—"

Allie said: "General, you are wasting your breath!"

Blade could tell that the General grew red behind his beard, and his big breast swelled with intake of breath. He cleared his throat roughly. "And I must tell you that it is not '*our* road.' It is our responsibility and trust! We are informed that certain crimes will be committed if we continue to do our duty. If men are to be deterred from their duty by threats, and by yielding to fears, then this nation will soon break up into disorder and lawlessness."

Allie looked out of the window, not avoiding him; his big words and rolling sentences meant nothing at all to her.

"What is more," said the General, "building this railroad is like the movement of an army. Those in command give orders. Those who disobey orders must expect to suffer. Mr. Hallard has told us that Engineers Davids and Harrington were under explicit orders not to go into, near, or beyond Plummer City. They disobeyed, and—"

Allie jumped up and faced about, her clenched hands stiffly down at her sides. "I didn't think men could be so hard and—*mean*! You sit there and call your own son 'Engineer Harrington!' You say, or the same as say: 'Let him be killed! Let anything happen to him, and all those other men—just so we finish the road—and make money! And make people think we are wonderful because we have built the railroad!'"

Her face worked into tears and crying, she went on: "I don't care what you say; I don't care what you do, or think or anything—this road is not going on as long as Jack's life is in danger and I can stop it. I will stop it! I don't want money—I want Jack!"

She turned to Belle, and lay against her breast, and wept. Grogan continued to stare at the tips of the General's boots, and Hallard kept his head high and his hand before his eye. And under his bushy brows the General watched Allie, concealing his amazement, and pride too, though his honesty and stubborn courage was perturbed and thwarted.

No one said a word, and Allie's crying quieted. Without looking up, she told Belle: "Come on. I won't stay here." They started to leave the car; then Allie pulled back from Miss Belle and said furiously: "I told you I'd give everything that I own to the Ganfords, and I will—I'll wire what you call the transfer of stock to them if you so much as lay another rail on this old road before Jack comes back to me!"

Then out she went; and Miss Belle, holding the door open for her, looked back with glowing eyes straight at Blade, as if bidding him take notice of what love could make of a woman, and make her do.

Blade remained standing. The others sat without speaking for a time and avoided one another's eyes. Then, "Match?" said the General, and Blade gave it to him. "Thanks." That was all for another long time. The General had his head at the slight tilt so characteristic when thoughtfully making decision. Thick smoke hung about his head. "Hallard?"

Hallard took his hand from before his face, and his sunken eyes gleamed with the look that wounded men have when they want to fight on and can't.

"Grogan?"

Grogan looked up, dragging his eyes unwillingly.

"Blade?"

"Yes, General."

"Gentlemen, this road is going on." The General spoke without emphasis. He had made up his mind and that was sufficient. He didn't have to shout about it. "Hallard, you are to see to it and make sure that no telegram leaves this town signed by Miss Fenton. Have it accepted, but it must not be sent. . . . Grogan, how much time do you need to lay rails into Plummer City?"

Grogan said, "Uh," reflectively. "About all the time we have. This is July 20th. To September 15th. Fifty-seven or sixty miles to go. Ten miles of track to lay after we get there. We can make a little better than a mile a day now. Not much time to lose. And if we have any trouble—too bad."

Then the General shifted heavily in his chair and gazed at Blade. He did not need to speak; Blade knew what he was asking, and replied: "I don't know how long it would take, General. I have had two or three men over there. They haven't been able to tell much so far. I doubt if they can tell what we want to know now. They have probably taken our men away from the town. Hid them somewhere. Where—we have to find out."

"Blade, you can have ten days. Grogan, on the first of August, at the very latest, sir, no matter what has happened—or may happen, understand—you begin laying iron. And you'll have to lay it last."

Blade shook hands with the General, said, "Good-by, General. I'm off." He lifted his arm at Grogan, glanced at Hallard, then went out the rear door.

Ayers paced to and fro, slope-shouldered, depressed, and when he faced about, he regarded Blade with an uneasy stare as he smiled, oozyly. "How do you do, Colonel, sir?"

"You know what the road is up against."

"Yes sir," Ayers sighed, and clucked regretfully. "All is lost, I fear. And I fear for Mr. Hallard's—" He drew in his breath and seemed about to smile—or cry. Everything about the man hinted at a hypocrite; yet Blade, remembering their conversation—at the point of a gun—had gone over it and over it, and found that Ayers had seemed truthful, logical, and fair—for a man in his hard fix.

"There is something I have wondered about, Ayers. I've wanted to ask you. Will you tell me?"

"What, sir?" It was a cautious whisper.

"Why are you so devoted to Mr. Hallard?"

Ayers seemed about to reply at once, but he didn't. He gazed at Blade for a long time; then, simply: "He is my brother, sir." Blade doubted that, but gave no sign; yet Ayers must have sensed the doubt. Whisperingly: "It scarcely matters what else you know concerning me, sir. I

have been in prison. He never disowned or avoided me. He is probably the best man in the world, Colonel, sir."

Blade said on the instant: "Then you wrote that letter you showed Jack Harrington?"

"Yes sir."

"Why?"

"He had hurt Mr. Hallard in every way he could, Colonel Blade, sir. And I wanted to hurt him. And I did."

"You did, all right. Damn' near broke the boy into pieces. You are a queer fellow. A mixture of downright frankness and—" Blade grinned a little, and Ayers grinned back, nodding. "Now, Ayers, I want you to use some of the—umm—best of your cleverness. I am trusting you, and it is all in your hands. This is what I want: I am taking the first train out of here, and if there isn't one leaving for end of track in an hour or two, I'll commandeer an engine. Just as soon as it is dark, I want you to—"

That night word went through Fenton City, and was carried east and west by the telegraph, that Colonel William Blade had been killed in a gun-fight with unknown persons on a material-train. . . .

That same night a man on horseback carried a letter addressed to Mr. Bernard Taggart at Plummer City, signed by Ayers. Ayers wrote evasively that he had at last succeeded in making arrangements to accomplish what Mr. Taggart, some time ago, had so considerably advised. The postscript told: "Many persons in this town are saddened to learn that Colonel Blade, whom you may remember, has been killed."

All through the night Belle Menlinton lay awake, dry-eyed, staring at nothing. Old Doc Baron got drunk as a hoot owl, but kept an owlish dignity, and was helped to bed by friends.

When the news was brought to General Harrington, he bit off the tip of his thirty-second cigar for that day and nodded. From deep down in his throat he said: "Urgh. Very bad. Urgh. Be very bad for some people! Urgh!"

CHAPTER TWENTY

PLUMMER CITY'S biggest joy-joint was the tented Red Onion. The town, as yet, was mostly tents, though Plummer's freight-wagons and some timber-haulers from creek bottoms had brought in wood, enough to put up a hotel and a few stores; and the "city" swarmed with men—and women. Freighters camped about the town. The railroad was coming, and there was the surge of men who wanted to get in before the road. Throughout the night roisterers whooped and shot at the stars, or at each other. Wild and wide-open with speculative frenzy and lawlessness.

Ned Patton played poker in the Red Onion. It was Taggart's place, or so-called. Patton guessed that it was also Weldron's and Plummer's. Taggart had tried to hire him as a house-man, but Patton, in his drowsy way, explained: "I'll play a lone hand so I can stay foot-loose." Taggart also had urged, "Why don't you an' Belle join up over here? You, her and the Doc?" Patton had said, "Yeah?" as if thinking about it. What he really thought about was the fact that Miss Belle was through with crooked cards; and that he, now, was case-keeper in a more dangerous game than hers had ever been. He was "keeping cases," or trying to, on Weldron's play against the railroad.

Through a drowsy smile he had explained to Blade: "I'll go, but you can't hire me. I'm on your side. One reason's 'cause I like you. The other'n, 'cause she does." Blade hadn't asked, and Patton did not say, who "she" was. The word was ignored, understandingly.

One night as Patton was dealing, Betty came up and tapped his shoulder. "Blade's dead!" she told him in a tense queer voice. For a moment his fingers paused as he turned aside and looked up at her. She added with a far-away sound: "Taggart wants to see you."

"You glad?" Ned Patton asked.

She stared blankly at the huddle of chips in the table's center. "In a way—no. Are you, Ned?"

"Me? H'm. We never quarreled."

He went on dealing, and the cards leaped from the pack like birds that flew without having to beat their wings. He could keep two cards in the air while dealing a seven-handed game, and each card dropped in place without a flutter. Patton picked up his hand, squeezed the pips into view, asked Betty: "How'd it happen?"

Betty shook her head; her fingers tightened on Patton's shoulder. "I don't know."

Patton threw away his hand, cashed in. Betty stood and watched him. When he left the table, he said lazily: "Come on. Buy you a drink." On their way around the noisy dance-floor to the bar, he told her, offhand, almost as if not interested: "Better not act like you felt bad. Lots of people won't like it."

PATTON flipped a hand in careless greeting at the two tough fellows loafing on guard outside of the canvas cubbyhole that was Taggart's office. They were watchmen and bouncers. "Hy-ee, Ned?" One jerked his head, inviting Patton to go on in. Patton swung back the heavy black tarpaulin that served as a door. It rustled stiffly.

Taggart grinned at Patton, pushed out a bottle and glass, laughed. "Betty tell you?"

Patton had a look at the bottle label. "Yeah. Lucky turn for some people, wasn't it?"

"Luck, hell!" said Taggart, gleefully. "Cold-decked him, by God!"

"Yeah?" Patton poured a drink. "Him? I thought he knew all the tricks!"

"Member Rhobb?"

"Ought to."

"You knew who done that, didn't you?"

"Never knew it well enough to tell anybody as I know of."

"Blade found out who shot 'im. When Collins was dyin', he told it all! Thought he was smart, this Blade!" Taggart sneered. "You see, he figgered they needed Ayers in Hallard's office till the road was built. I told Ayers just how it was, and what he'd better do!" Pride of cleverness was glistering on Taggart's face. "You know how we've stopped work on the road!"

"Me?" Ned Patton's eyes were half closed sleepily. "No. I don't know anything." He sounded as if uninterested.

"But you've heard, Ned?" Taggart seemed disappointed.

"Heard? Hell, yes! You hear plenty. You don't know what to believe, and when you don't care—what of it? A feller was sayin' tonight they had Davids and young Harrington in a cellar over under the hotel. I didn't even ask him how he knew."

"They're not there. I'm not saying *where* they are—"

"I'm not askin' you," Patton told him, and drank. He

grinned, added: "You prob'ly don't know, anyhow."

"The hell I don't!" said Taggart defiantly.

"What happened to this Blade fellow?"

"Oh, him? Hal! Look here, I'll show you." Taggart gave him Ayers' letter. "Just come in tonight. I showed it to Roy and Plummer. Maybe they don't feel better, heh?"

Patton read slowly, then smiled at Taggart. "I bet they think you're clever'n them, even!" He studied the letter again. "You and Ayers, h'm?"

"'Twas me," Taggart explained, tapping his breast. "I put Ayers up to it! And maybe you think Roy Weldron aint relieved, too! 'Tween you and I, he's been afraid of Blade. Talks big and all that, but he's been just plain scairt!"

"Yeah? H'm. Who'd have thought that! I bet it was you, too, that thought up the stunt of havin' young Harrington and them caught and hid away!"

"No," Taggart protested. "No, no." But in modestly denying it he seemed trying to deserve the credit. "All I did was pick out the fellows. Weldron and Plummer and

me are not supposed to have anything to do with it. And I—" Taggart cleared his throat, eyed Patton with the look of, "Maybe I'd better not talk too much," and grinned slyly. "Have another drink, Ned?"

"Don't care if I do. I've been thinkin'. That offer still open for me, Miss Belle and the Doc? I thought you had it in for the Doc over that mayor business?"

"No, no. Oh, no! That's all cleared up. He did me a good turn. After Collins named me, and Ayers—well, that damned Blade locked me up. The Doc turned me loose. You and Belle and him would make a great bunch for over here!"

Patton poured more whisky. "I think I'll go back to Fenton. Talk it over with Miss Belle. This letter Ayers sent you—sounds educated as hell, don't it? Must be wonderful to be as smart as all that!"



"You and Belle and the Doc—have it all your own way—" "Maybe so," Patton admitted. "'Spose we get down to cases. First, tell them sheriff-dodgers you've got out there not to let anybody in for half-hour or so. We'll talk this over. Give me a good proposition, and I'll take it to Miss Belle."

Taggart went forward to the black tarpaulin, pushed his head out. "Don't let anybody in here for a while, boys." He came back with the brisk friendliness of a man who is about to get the best of a bargain. "Set down, Ned and—Goda'mighty, don't—"

"Shut up!" said Patton, soft and slow, with his gun's muzzle only inches from Taggart's belly. "We're goin' out the back way. *Move!*"

"B-but what got into you?"

"You'll learn. Bad to talk too much, like you've done!"

There was no opening the back way, and the canvas was pegged down tight to the ground; but Patton made a long slit with his knife, then closed the knife with pres-

sure against his leg, dropped the knife into his pocket. Not hurrying, he took hold at the back of Taggart's shirt collar, shoved him through and held on, then followed with twist of body through the slit.

"Keep movin'!" said Patton, and pushed.

Shadows, two of them, man-shaped, appeared around a wagon behind the tent. The wagon had hauled in supplies late that afternoon, and since deliveries could not conveniently be made through the night-swarming crowd, it was

"Here!" called a voice. "What's goin' on here?"

"Private doin's!" Patton called back, easily. "Keep out!"

"That's Taggart, Jim!" a second voice shouted, pitched to an alarmed concern. "Hey, Taggy, what's—"

"Hey, stop, you, there!" the first man cried.

"Boys—" Taggart yelled, whether beginning a plea for help, or to beg them not to shoot, no man could say. Gun-fire spurted at Ned Patton's silhouette, which was target-plain against the glow, first one gun, then another.

"You damn' fool!" said Patton, shoving at Taggart, and added, "Keep goin'!" His revolver blazed at the wagon guards. *Bang—bang—bang!* came back at him. Taggart was pulling against the out-thrust arm, trying to run. *Bang—bang!* The wagon-guards tried again for Patton's



Passing a bottle to and fro, one by one they were sheared and shaved.

left there, with two men on guard over the case of whisky, boxes of tobacco, and straw-packed magnums.

Patton and Taggart were silhouetted against the glow of the lamp inside the tent: a man pushed out at arm's-length by another who held a revolver.

jiggling shadow. Taggart lurched, jerking loose, squawked wildly and went down in a headlong tumble. "Tent-rope!" Patton thought, and jumped high, clearing Taggart's body.

He ran easily, keeping to shadows, his boots soundless on the sod. The wagon-guards had not followed. Behind, he could hear the clamor, vaguely. There would be a commotion and search. Too bad, he thought, that he hadn't put a bullet into Taggart, even into Taggart's back—which wasn't his way. The murder of Blade had made him not care much about fair play. Patton stopped in the dead black shadow of the stage office. He had reloaded his gun—which had never been quite empty. "Always have at least one bullet left," was a saying he tried to follow.

He peered out at the hitching-rack. Three saddled horses were there. Being a horse-thief was dangerous, but trying to stay in town more dangerous. In the vague light, he couldn't very well judge which was the best horse—but decided on the nearest. Men were going back and forth down the street, not running. A little shooting scrape didn't mean so very much; but there would be endless jaw-wagging about why he had shoved Taggart out through a slit in the canvas. Patton smiled some more. It was always a good thing never to talk too much. He hadn't shown his hand, even to Taggart. He had intended to make Taggart show him where the Davids and Harrington party were being held.

The horse's reins were on the ground, and he was tied loosely with a saddle-rope. Patton, not hurrying, coiled the rope, retied it to the saddle, leaving the noose about the horse's neck. He took the reins and led the horse slowly away from the hitching-rack, behind the stage office, and on out toward the edge of town. Whoever saw him would not be likely to think he was stealing a horse on foot. He was well out of town before he swung into the saddle, slapped with the reins' ends and set out for Fenton City.

When the young Texan, Alford, came for his horse, it was not there. He let out a string of cuss-words that would have made a rattlesnake back away; then his voice softened, and his cuss-words had a soothed wonderment as he thought he could guess at what had happened: Patton had chosen his horse to escape, which was all right with young Alford, though he was in a hurry to get back to the camp with the bad news that Colonel Blade had been killed.

Al had ridden in to see if Patton had learned anything, and was just in time to get into the commotion around the Red Onion. Nobody knew why Ned Patton had done a thing of that kind: he had dropped a wagon-guard with a broken leg, and, some said, had killed Taggart. Anyhow, Taggart was dead. At first men surged all about looking for Patton, but there was much talk and too much drinking; and the general feeling grew that a dead man was merely a dead man, though he be Berny Taggart.

Al went down to the corral and told about how he had lost saddle, horse and all in a poker game, but fellows had made up a pot for him to hire a horse so he could get back to camp, a buffalo-hunter's camp.

"Me, I'm a skinner," said Al. "Let me have a horse that aint worth stealin'—if you don't think I can be trusted."

It was well past sunup when the tired horse trotted into camp, and from the saddle Al told the news: "Blade's dead! Taggart too—Patton killed 'im! Patton ride down here?"

The boys looked at Al and grinned, looked at one another and snickered some. He demanded angrily: "What's the matter with you galoots? No joke as I see! The Colonel's dead, and—"

The lanky Tex's grin widened. "Yeah, we knew! His ghost rode in bareback on a mule he stole at the end of the track! He'd hid himself like he was dead, so nobody but us would know. He's asleep over there. Pile yourself off that bone-rack. We're ridin' into Plummer tonight! The railroad's give the Colonel ten days to do his doin's. He wants to give 'em back about seven or eight, so—"

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

THEY jogged toward Plummer City, in a wide circle that avoided the road, and waited five miles from town for darkness. The boys squatted cross-legged and on haunches, letting the horses graze, drawlingly teased Alford, who couldn't remember where the blacksmith's shop was, but had told the Colonel where there was the prettiest girl!

Blade had as good a map as Alford could give, which was not good. "*The Red Onion, stage office, hotel*"—"some more tents," vaguely. "Freighters over there—I never been there in daylight, Colonel."

Blade, who knew what a map ought to be like, was not critical. The boy had given the best he knew, and towns were confusing to men who were used to judging distance by the mile.

There was no need of trying to guess what Patton had been up to. He had counted on Patton, who was there playing a lone hand. He had sent other fellows riding in and out, never—except to young Alford—mentioning Ned Patton, and without learning anything of specific value. Plummer, not Weldron, was supposed to be at the head of the town. But Weldron had brought off an audacious stroke, with cleverness; and Blade had the chagrin of having perhaps tragically underestimated the fellow. There was only one chance to strike back, and he could strike in only one way. It was not enough to move boldly; there must be certainty too, for if he failed this night, it would be known that he was not dead and—well, he felt that he might as well be dead for any good he could afterward do General Harrington. . . .

When darkness came, they rode on at a walk; there was lots of time, a whole night of it. They went through lowland grass higher than their stirrups, plodded up the rise and saw the glow of Plummer City two miles off.

A bunch of heavily armed men riding into town, even in darkness, might attract notice. Anyhow, Blade did not want them waiting around in town. They were young, incautious; girls would be at them, and they might start drinking, or snap back at quarrelsome words without drinking. Blade knew the hazard he was taking.

Somewhere, far ahead, a dog barked—probably a wagoner's dog. Blade studied the sky, which was not cloudy enough to promise the rain he would like to have for this night. The horses walked on with faint creak of saddles, clink of spurs, jingle of bit-chains as they bobbed their heads.

"This is close enough, boys. You wait here. Be a long wait," Blade told them. Saddles creaked as they swung off, dropping reins, hitching up their pants. "Be careful about cigarettes. Light them behind your hats, close to the ground. If anybody comes nosing close, tie 'em up! But no noise! And Tex, let's trade hats. Mine's no better, but yours is gray. I'd give a couple of dollars for a full beard!"

"Another thing. If you hear shooting, stay right here. Stay here till Al comes back. And unless he tells you otherwise, when you ride in, ride slow!"

Blade and Alford went on, stirrup to stirrup, still walking. A horse nickered as they passed a wagon. A man called out of shadows, "Howdy?" as if inviting conversation. Alford said, "Howdy," but they did not pause. Far ahead in the street some fellow was whooping.

Alford said: "Funny, you just don't feel you're havin' fun unless you make a noise. All of us that way—only mebbe not you."

They turned from the street, picking a way around tents and buildings. "Yonder's the hotel. Block away, back of it, the warehouse. I forgot it when I made the map. Sure hot here in daytime, I bet. Not a tree in town." They came up an empty side-street, rounded the corner, and were again on Main. "Stage office," said Alford. "Corral's on down there. Other horses were at the hitching-rack. Men had ridden in from hunters, graders', perhaps timber-cutters' camps. "Noisy as hell," said Alford, looking off down the street, listening.

The fellow was still whooping and had roused other men to the merriment of answering and joining in. "I'm a wolf, *whew-whoo-pee!*"—"Best you c'n howl?" a powerful voice taunted, amiably. It was all fun. Figures came out doorways, passed through the street's dimness, appeared at other doorways. Music jangled through the noise.

"You keep out of sight, and wait. I'll be back," Blade told him. "Be a long night."

Blade pulled the hat forward, rubbed at his cheek as he walked away. Two days without shaving had roughened his face to a slightly unwashed look, but had not helped concealingly. He stepped back to let a mule-drawn wagon

pass with squeal of dry axles. Some hunters' camp had sent it in for supplies. "Sounds like rats dyin' in a trap!" a man commented. "Sure does," Blade told him, and walked on.

He went up and down the street, walking wide of the lighted doorways. Back of him a gun began going off. Men swung their heads, startled, then took no further notice. The fellow was firing straight up and yelled: "Bill-eel! Bill-eel!" It was his way of calling to a strayed companion. "Where the hell are you, Bill-eel!" Some voices yelled, "Here! Here I am! . . . Here!" from all about. Another man began shooting, just for the fun of it. "Like Fourth-July, purt-near," a man remarked at Blade's shoulder.

"Or last night's scrapel!" Blade added: "Anything been heard of Patton since?"

"Not's I know of."

"Why'd do you suppose he killed Taggart?"

"'Twasn't him a-tall. One o' them fool freighters!" The man spat. "Freighters can't shoot, 'less they got a Sharp's an' a dead mule to rest it on! But you tell me what he was a-tryin' to do with 'im, taking him off through a hole in the tent like that?"

"I can't," said Blade.

"Nobody else, I reckon!"

A MUFFLED pound of hoofs came down the street—a half-dozen horsemen at an easy lope that stirred a foglike dust, sent it sifting across the doorways. The street crowd let them through, and some called familiarly to the men in the saddle. Blade peered through the vague light as the horses went by.

"Who are they?"

"Them? You a stranger here? That's Weldron an' his bunch. They been out huntin', I guess. Yeah. Here comes the wagon with the dogs. And girls."

The ambulance jangled up and by. The dust closed in behind its wheels like thick smoke.

The man pointed with a loose arm down the street, said, "Now them fellows can shoot!" and went off, leaving Blade to saunter on.

Blade crossed the street and turned, going back, loiteringly. Dust was still in the air, but he could tell that there was a stir and gathering some distance off where the horsemen had stopped. Probably at the hotel. He had learned one thing: Weldron kept men about him who could shoot.

Blade joined the outer edge of the idlers about the hotel front. It was largely a case of where a few stop and stare, more will come and stare too. The ambulance had stopped there, and the women had gone inside. "Big supper and dance, I hear. . . . Just had one couple nights ago. . . . Fellers with money got a right to fun, aint they? What else money for?" As near as Blade could judge, the "hotel" was a pine-box barn of a place, two-storied, without balcony or porch.

He asked a man: "Weldron lives here?"

"Sure does. Him and his whole bunch."

"Full up, I suppose?"

"'Spose," the man agreed, offhand and indifferently.

"Where would a stranger bed down?"

"You a stranger? Well, if you don't like sleepin' on the ground, there's a tent-house other end o' 'he street. Hay in your bunk an' a blanket for a dollar. Same hay's growin' all around, free. Unless it rains, these nights you don't need a blanket." The man lifted his head, looking about overhead. "'Taint goin' to rain tonight!"

"Thanks," Blade told him, and walked to the hotel.

He stood back from the Red Onion's wide doorway and looked through. Lots of people in there, but it didn't appear crowded, because there was lots of room for people. Rather like a circus tent, at least a circus sideshow tent. The dance-floor was an oblong piece of flooring laid on the sod and covered with canvas, smeared with candle-grease, and oiled sawdust was spread over that. Scooting feet shifted the sawdust off the "floor," and it lay in small drifts.

Men staggered by him, whisky and tobacco on their breath, weariness in their legs. Some, he guessed, were from the graders' camps at the edge of town, now plodding bunk-ward. Clever of the Ganfords to let the work be done, and plan to settle for it in bankruptcy!

He pulled the wide gray hat low over his face and went in. The warm air seemed almost damp with the smell of sweat. No ventilation and there were a dozen lanterns overhead, also a lantern slung above each of the card-tables along the far wall. Tobacco smoke curled about in drifting layers, acrid as smudge. The musicians were down to their shirts and their shirts were wet; and they played noisily.

"Quart of Hawkeye," Blade told the bartender, not looking up.

"You bet." The bartender saw the gold-piece in Blade's fingers. A girl saw it too, and swung away from the sloppy teamster who was down to silver change. She hooked her arm inside the bend of Blade's elbow. "Dance?" she coaxed.

He moved his face, looking from under the gray wide-brimmed hat. Betty drew back with a scream in her mouth that wouldn't come out. There was no breath left in her. She pulled as if it were only the hold on his arm that kept her from falling.

Blade lied, quietly: "I thought I would find you here!" He would have walked miles not to have her see him. To the bartender as he set out the bottle: "And a couple of whiskies."

Betty was gasping: "I thought—thought—Taggart said —you—oh!"

Blade did not know what to do with her. The Doc had once said: "Any old card you pick up, you make it trumps." Blade looked as wise as he could, and nodded. One squawk out of her, and he was licked. Betty picked up the whisky as soon as the bartender filled the glass. "I cried last night when I heard it!" she said, and drank. Blade did not believe that, but told her, "Thanks." This was the girl who had once made him think of apple-blossoms! The years, and other things, had poisoned her into a blowsy haggardness. He changed glasses on the bar. "Take the other if you need it," Betty tried to smile. "Need it? God!" She drank the second whisky. "You—thought you'd find me here? Did Ned Patton tell you?"

"Why did Patton do it last night?"

"Nobody knows—" She started to say "Colonel," but popped a hand at her mouth. "Let's go somewhere?" she asked. From under his low hat-brim he studied her face, trying to look behind the eyes, which once were wide with trustful-seeming innocence, but now were narrowed, tightened. There were splotches on her face, and red paint. "Don't trust her!" his thoughts told him. "Go where?" he asked.

She told him: "I don't care! Away from here. If I leave before time, I'll be fired, but I don't care—tonight. I don't care what happens to me!" She was obliquely saying that she would do anything for him. He did not believe her: Weldron would pay big money for what she could tell him tonight. "How can you leave? I mean, get away?"

"Why, I'll just go dress, slip on my cloak and come back. You wait here. I'm not a slave! There are other places to work. And this is a free country!"

"Good. But isn't there a way out back?"

"Oh, no, no!" She tried a smile, nervously. "Not unless you push a log away and crawl under the canvas, and it's pegged down tight. You wait here. I won't be long. Ten minutes, maybe fifteen. But I'll come back. You'll wait?"

"Yes," said Blade, and watched her go. The bartender reached out, cupping both the short thick whisky-glasses in one palm. Blade leaned toward him. "Tell me, is there a way out back of this tent?"

"Yeah, sure," said the bartender, pointing.

That was how it happened that Betty, running with a hooded cape drawn tightly about her, had not gone fifty feet before she came against Blade and breathlessly said,



"Here I've set up the nicest piece about how sorry we are that you're dead. And now you come to life!"

"Oh!" before she recognized him in the darkness. When he spoke she said, "You?" and began to cry.

Blade said: "Damn women! All women. Women as women! I suppose you just can't help it."

When she got her voice, she tried to say that she hated Weldron so much she had intended to get him to come to the Red Onion—face to face with Blade. "I knew you would kill him!"

"And all of the friends that came along?"

"Won't you ever believe me? Believe *anything* I say?" Betty asked in tears. "I like you. I do! I really do! You ask Ned Patton!"

Blade did not use much time, did not use any anger; he talked more as if coaxing, and while she would not make an admission, she did say Weldron had promised fine things a long time ago if she could ever give him information about Blade and his whereabouts. "But of course, I wouldn't! You just won't believe *me*, ever! Will you?"

"So far I have never regretted not believing you! But come along. We may work something out. I'll hold your arm. I've a quart of whisky in the other hand—by the neck. Please don't make me break it—over your head!"

They went around back of tents and buildings far down the street so they could cross unnoticed. The time was close to eleven, and the whisky tents were in full swing. From behind the stage office he whistled, and Alford came jogging. He did not know that the black shadow by Blade was a woman until he was told.

"Here is an old friend of mine, Al. The name is Betty. Keep her here—here out of sight, till I come back. And I mean *keep* her!"

Blade went on down to the corral, and an old man shambled out with a lantern in his hand. "Howdy?"

"Want to make some money and win Weldron's favor?"

"Yeah! Sure do! How?"

"Weldron and his friends keep horses here, don't they?"

"Good hosses too!"

"Here's a bottle of whisky I brought along." He offered it, and the old man said, "Thankee," held the bottle to the lantern, and murmured: "Umm-mm—Hawkeye!" "Now this is the way of it," Blade was saying, "and why you'll get five dollars, too. There's a girl over the Red Onion, a girl named Betty, who used to be in the Tip-top at Fenton City. There's a bet on over at the Onion—she is in on it—that she can make Weldron believe a fellow named Blade is in town. Weldron is looking for this Blade and—"

"But he's dead, I hear tell!" said the old man. "I heard talk about it around here today."

"Maybe this Betty is going to say he's come to life. Anyhow, there's a lot at stake. Here's five dollars to go with the whisky. Run down at the hotel and tell Weldron what is up. A bet, you understand. The girl and some men are going to try to make a fool of him. Maybe he'll give you a couple of dollars too!"

"I oughtn't leave, but—no, I oughtn't! Hm-mm."

"Let me have the whisky and money. I'll find somebody else." Blade reached out. The old man drew back, with: "Won't take but a minute or two. I'll go."

He started off with jiggling swing of arms and flat-footed slap of boots. Blade watched for a moment, then caught up the lantern, drew his knife, went in under the shed where saddles were hung, suspended by a stirrup from a peg, and cut the latigo of every one. If Weldron's friends wanted to ride this night, they could borrow saddles or mount bare-back. It would take time to find saddles in the morning's late hours. The whisky had been intended to let the corral man drug himself into sleep so the latigos could be slashed off; but Betty's story was better. Moreover, now, if anybody else caught sight of him, recognized him, said that he was not dead, Weldron would not believe it.

When the old fellow came back, grinning, Blade was squatting in shadows well behind the lantern. The old fellow chuckled. "Hee-hee! Weldron was mighty tickled; he was that. Said he knowed the girl, and it was like her. Hoped she'd come, he said. Said he wouldn't let on he knowed it was a bet. Hope your friend wins a pile of money!"

"Oh, at least a half-million!" Blade's voice joked. "Good night."

"Night, Mister. An' thanks for the Hawkeye!"

WHEN Blade went back to the stage office, Alford said, almost as if confessing a fault: "She's been beggin' like sixty for me to let her go. But you said to keep her. When a woman begs me, I get weak inside, I do!"

"All men do, boy. Just listen now while she begs me. I'll get weak, too. You'll see. Try it, Betty."

"Oh, go to hell!" said Betty. Blade told her, casually: "If that is how you really feel, all right, good-by. If you hurry back to the Onion, maybe you won't lose your job. Nobody saw you leave."

Betty came close, to peer through the deep darkness of the stage-office shadow into his face. "Y-you trust me?" She was trying to sound deeply moved. He asked: "Haven't you said I could?" Betty peered hard, and was uneasy. She tried to be earnest with: "Honest, I knew you'd shoot him—and that was what I wanted! Before God!" Blade replied: "It doesn't matter. You have found out that I don't hold a grudge. I'll give you another chance to—well, do whatever you want to do."

Betty seemed trying to think, and without much success. Her question was: "Are you going to stay in town?" That seemed too pointed, and she covered it over with: "I mean, will I see you again? I do want to—want to *prove* to you I'm not like you think!"

"Stay in town? I'm not even in town. You have been dreaming. Dreaming of a ghost. I'm dead. You knew that. Nothing has happened outside of your imagination. You have been sleepwalking, following a ghost. Bad luck to see a ghost, Betty."

She was nervously afraid of him now. "Bad luck," seemed like a threat. She knew how dangerous he was. She had no way of telling him, no thought of telling him, how jealously she ached to be among Weldron's friends, instead of a dance-hall trot. Being what she was, Weldron's favor was far more to her than Blade's life.

As she hurried off with the cloak drawn close about her, Blade went toward the hitching-rack. "Come on, boy," Alford came up with an almost shocked: "Why you doin' that?" Blade's knife was slicing cheek-straps on the bridles of the horses there, all but his and Alford's; then explained, "In case men run for horses later on, they'll have to stop and do some bridle-fixing."

"Yeah, but when some fellow wants to go?"

"He'll swear awhile, wish he knew who to shoot—then fix the bridle. But we had better ride from here. Betty may persuade somebody to come and look for my ghost."

They rode almost out of town, passing the corral, then turned and came in, leaving the horses behind the darkened warehouse that Alford had forgotten to put in the map; then on foot they made their way over toward the hotel, but kept well back.

Windows were up for what fresh air there was. A dance was going on. The piled-up tables and chairs indicated that the dance was in the dining-room. Laughter was loud, but it was laughter, not wild screaming. Weldron had not yet coarsened enough to want maudlin roistering and wildness in his fun. Figures moved across the windows to violin music. Blade could not be sure that he recognized Weldron, but he did recognize Betty leaving the front door and the glimmer of lamplight on her face showed a dazed fixed stare, rather the look that one might have in falling through space that had no bottom.

"Why, that's her!" said Alford.

"No, Al. That's somebody that used to be 'her'. She'll never be the same. And will lie awake lots of nights wondering what the hell?"

"Are you hopin' he'll come outdoors here for some air?"

"The best I am hoping for is that they will quiet down and begin going to bed about three o'clock."

"Then what, Colonel?"

"You will bring the boys in and bring them quietly."

Weldron stood clearly in the door, lit a cigar and came out. Alone he walked up and down along the side of the hotel. They could follow him through the shadows by the beacon glow of the cigar's tip. At times when he passed an open window he paused, looked through, then would go on with the pace of a man who had something on his mind.

Blade, a hundred feet from the hotel, put a hand on Alford's arm and squeezed. "Wait here!" he whispered against the boy's ear. "It's a chance!"

But a man came from the front of the hotel, called, "Roy?" turned the corner, again calling, "Roy!" Weldron answered, facing about to meet him, "I'm out here, Dunn." Then Dunn told him, "Say, there's a fellow in the bar right now tellin' that he saw Blade in town tonight!"

Weldron's cigar tip moved up in a gesture of careless dismissal. "I know it. Not a chance. Blade is dead!"

The fellow Dunn's voice held uneasy concern. "But that girl said it, then this fellow! Hadn't we better—"

Weldron laughed. "Not if a hundred say it! The man who sent word that he is dead, knows!" Then boastfully, "I wish it wasn't so! I've owed him a lot for a long time, and my way's to make payment in full, by God!"

"Yeah, you bet!" said Dunn in a voice that wanted to please. "Aint you comin' back in? They're ready to fix somethin' t'eat. Oysters and champagne, umm!"

Weldron told him, "No. I'm tired. Want my head clear, too. A letter to write before I go to bed. And that's soon! Go back in and have a good time. Won't be many more. My work out here is done. I'm returning East."

The man went indoors, and Weldron again walked up and down, stopping now and then before a window, talking sometimes with women who huddled forward on the

ledge. "You go on with your fun," Weldron told them. The music had stopped, tables were being lifted and put out on the floor. Weldron went in, said again with generous voice: "Go on with your fun!"

Blade and Alford returned toward the warehouse where the horses were standing. "Bring the boys in, Al. Take your time. No hurry at all. I'll be waiting here."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THEY came at a trot, the hoofs soft in the dust of the cut-up sod. It was nearly three o'clock. The town was awake but without much wandering about the street for men had clustered in the whisky tents, drinking, gambling, dancing, though some staggered about with sodden bleariness.

The horsemen dismounted back of the warehouse and, with reins trailing in their hands, stood close to Blade and listened. "Quiet till you hear a shot upstairs. Then. . . If you don't hear the shot, so much the better! It will mean less trouble!"

One voice protested, "Hell, Colonel! I don't want to hold horses! They'll stand—aw!"

"You'll see it all. And take part, too, Jess. Here we go, and quietly!"

They rode up in a bunch before the hotel, ten of them, counting Blade. One man stopped some fifty feet short of, and one rode some fifty feet beyond, where the others stopped. Those two men stayed in the saddle with instructions to stop, hold back, the curious who might come running. The others swung off, gave over their reins to Jess who stood with hands full of leather in the midst of the horses. All of the horses were used to gunfire. Blade paused to light a lantern and four men ran up to the hotel, covering doors and windows.

Blade clicked down the lantern chimney, said, "Come on!" and started for the front door, followed by Tex, Alford and Tom. A man lurched curiously out of the door, shouted, "Hey, what's goin' on?" Blade, not answering, struck with the barrel of his revolver. The fellow dropped. One yap out of him and shooting would have had to begin.

In they went, Blade leading with a lighted lantern in one hand, a drawn revolver in the other. He swung into the barroom with, "Hands up!" The dozen men there turned with stupid look, saw Blade backed by lean-faced fellows with rifles in their hands. A big fellow gulped, "Oh, that's him!" Others knew what he meant: he had been saying that he had seen Blade at the Red Onion. "Quiet!" said Blade, and the word was like something thrown straight and hard. The only sound was the nervous shift of boots. Hands were up, and fright was seared across their faces. In the hush the noise of gayety came clearer, from the dining-room, now. Women's voices were the loudest.

"That door?" asked Blade, pointing, and looked at a bartender.

"Locked to keep fellows from goin' in!"

Blade's eyes went across each man's face, and each seemed to feel that he had been given a special warning. "This house is surrounded! Nobody will be hurt who stays quiet and out of the way! Now you, come here!"

"Me?" said the bartender, weakly.

"Put down your hands and come on!"

The fellow put down his hands, stooped out of sight for a moment, moved in a slow crouch from under an opening in the bar, fumbled at the cloth of an apron in wiping dust from his fingers as he came near.

Blade pushed him past Tex and Tom, saying to Alford, "Come on!" At the foot of the stairs, Blade asked, "Where's Weldron's room?" The bartender pointed. He was breathing so quickly that it gave a stuttery ripple to his whispered, "T-t-top of the st-stairs."

"You're a dead man if you've lied!"

"T-t-top of the st-stairs!" he repeated, pointing upward.

"Go back in the barroom! Move!"

The fellow joggled back with sweat streaming from his face; then Blade said, "On your toes, Al!" and started up the steps, two at a time, treading lightly.

Before he reached the top he looked ahead, saw the glimmer of a light under the door, straight before him. He told Alford, "You watch up and down the hall!" At the head of the stairs Blade set his lantern down. That was his precaution to make sure of light if a lamp overturned.

He leaned close to the door, listening, and heard no sound from within. There were muffled echoes of the dining-room's fun, not yet in any way disturbed. Three minutes had not passed from the time Blade swung from his horse before the hotel until he was at Weldron's door.

He did not dare try the door in the silence. There would be a click, however delicately he touched the knob. And if the door was locked, there was only one way—to go through and make it a surprise.

Blade stepped back, leaned to Alford, whispered, "I think it's locked. I want to be sure. Go down three or four steps and come back—make a noise. He'll think it's just anybody coming up!"

As Alford started up Blade put his hand to the door knob, leveled the revolver, then, under cover of the heavy steps, he turned the knob, pushed, and the door did not give. Instantly Blade fired into the lock, hit the door with his shoulder, knocking it wide. He was in the room and halfway across before the startled Weldron, who sat on the bed slowly undressing, could make a groping snatch for the gun in the holster that dangled on its belt from the back of a chair by the bedside—where it would be handy.

Blade did not speak but went straight at him and Weldron, as if in a daze, sat with hand out, touching the butt of the gun he did not dare draw. His mouth was wide open, head half back, with eyes stretched as if it were indeed a ghost he saw. The look in Blade's eyes would have made any man afraid. He was quick; and, just as if it were what he had come into the room to do, he swung down the barrel of the revolver on Weldron's hand even as he was jerking it away, empty. Weldron cried out like a mute in pain and clutched his hand, shrinking back.

From below came the sound of gunfire, yells, the sharper scream of women. Blade's men were firing through door and windows into the dining-room, over men's heads, to show them the folly of trying to make it a fight.

Blade said slowly, "Plummer's told me where they are! Now you tell me where they are! If your stories don't agree, one of you'll be hanged before morning!"

WELDRON scrouged back, his fingers writhing at his hurt hand. He looked stunned. Below, the burst of gunfire had almost stopped; and, instead, there could be heard the shout of Texans: "Keep 'em up, you damn' Yanks! . . . Hold-up! You bet she's a hold-up!"—with an intermittent *bang! bang!* and yells wild as a Comanche's.

There was no hope in Weldron's face, but his eyes staringly questioned Blade, and Blade told him: "My men, and plenty of them! You've said the War's not over! Where are those men?"

Weldron choked in asking: "Plummer? Where'd he say? Soote River—north the track—ten miles—fifteen—cabin—timber-cutter's old cabin—they're there—"

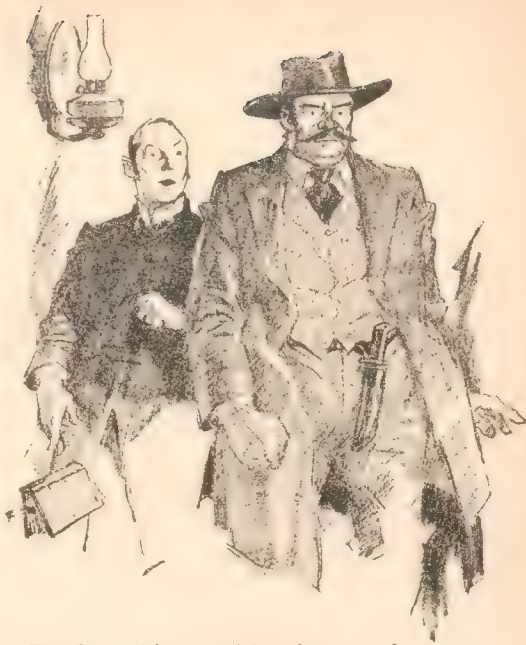
"That's not what Plummer told me!"

Weldron roused up with, "My God, Blade! That's where they are! We put them way back there—behind the railroad—we knew you'd never look for them so near—so near the road!"

"That was a good guess too," Blade admitted. "Now where's the letter you wrote tonight?" Blade's hand moved silently. "Don't say, 'What letter?' or ask how I know! I want it!"

"Over there!" He looked amazed and gestured toward the table.

"Up off that bed and get it!"



The Doc, without noticing, jostled the small nervous preacher.

Weldron moved. He had his boots off, his coat off, his shirt was unbuttoned and pulled from his trousers. He picked up the letter with his left hand, still nursing the hurt right hand under an armpit to ease the pain. Blade took the letter, crumpled it into his pocket, said, "Keep going, Weldron!"

"Go—go where?"

"To a timber-cutter's cabin on Soote River!"

"I'm not—my boots—I'm not dressed!"

"Go on!" said Blade, and Weldron went. "Faster!" said Blade, and pushed. He called behind, "Come on, Al!"

At the foot of the stairs Blade asked, "Where is Plummer?"

"Why, you said—"

"I never tell the truth to a liar!" Blade pointed. "He's not in there. I looked!"

Oaths gushed suddenly from Weldron's mouth. "I ought've known you hadn't seen Plummer! He's up—" Too late he snapped his mouth shut, brought his lips together, and read Blade's guess on his face before Blade said, "Over at the Soote River cabin? We'll go see!" Then, "Call the boys, Al! We are riding!"

Outside a crowd was gathering in the street, emptying the tents, but checked by men on horseback, who yelled, "Keep back! Stay back!" Somebody had said, "Hold-up!" then others said it, one to another. The men who talked most bravely were, as usual, the farthest behind in the crowd; at least they yelled the loudest. It wasn't the crowd's fight, not after some fellow fired over the false front of the store across the street from the hotel and had two rifles smack at him. "There's a hundred—look at all them horses!" Some excited eyes saw in multiples.

Rifle-fire rolled through the barroom as the door, locked to keep the half drunk and uninvited from staggering in on the party, was unlocked and opened. "Aim high!" Blade had said, wanting men intimidated rather than wounded. The door was crashed shut again by the trapped men in the dining-room. Men in the barroom flat-

tened down, afraid of bullets. Blade looked through, with "Come on, Tex! Tom!" They backed out, Tex lingering at the door as if hopeful somebody would pull a gun.

Blade's men came from about the hotel, yelling like Indians, irrepressibly. A hand thrust a revolver out of the dining-room window, shot twice—and rifle-bullets smashed glass where the hand had been. That was enough to quiet the men there.

"Climb up!" said Blade to Weldron. "We brought this horse in for you! Give him a hand up, Tex."

They were snatching reins from Jess, the horse-holder, and swinging into saddles. Jess said: "Damn, I aint shot once!" He drew his revolver and emptied it, just for the noise.

Blade was the last man into the saddle, and he rode last. Young Alford, all agrin, reined back alongside of him. "They can't follow anyhow, Colonel! You cut the bridles and latigo straps!"

"Not to keep men from following!"

"Then what the hell, Colonel?"

"I was afraid Davids and Harringtons might be held where somebody could get to them before we could. Nobody can! You'll see! Weldron had a brilliant idea—but locomotives travel faster than horses!"

As the horses jogged by a woman rushed forward. Hands snatched to pull her back for fear that she would be trampled, but she ripped her clothes to break away, and men reined aside, avoiding her—a half-drunken dance-hall girl. She pressed right up to Weldron's stirrup, screamed mockingly at him, "Now do you believe me! Threw me out, you did! Laughed! Said you wished he wasn't dead!" The horse with Weldron on it had gone by, and her voice followed him in a shriek as if to split her throat and make him hear: "You got your wish, you—"

Blade looked down and said, "Good-by, Betty, and thanks for helping!" He rode on while she stood staring.

It was mid-afternoon when tired men with horses sweating came to the end of track. The iron gang that loafed morosely shouted one to another and ran with mob-like rush for the telegraph-car, pressing in among the horsemen who grinned in happy weariness. Blade, they said, was inside there. And with Weldron. Blade, dead? Not that man! Of course they knew where Davids and Harringtons were. Blade now was after an engine and car to take them back to Soote. They had raided Plummer City and walked out, by God! Shot it up, good! The road would go on.

In substance that was about what an excited telegrapher hammered over the wire into Fenton. Colonel Blade "respectfully reports"—the General liked reports to be made "respectfully"—and so forth and so forth. One Royal Weldron, "prisoner," together with a letter signed by the prisoner and addressed to one Jacob Gilcroy, New York City, his uncle, giving details of the successful accomplishment of said Royal Weldron's mission, and so forth. Engineer party reported to be held prisoners at deserted timber-cutter's cabin near Soote Station. "Respectfully requests" that locomotive and box-car be placed at disposal of Blade for transporting men and horses.

Old Pop McVey gouged, elbowed, pushed his way through men, up the car steps, came in excitedly. Blade leaned against the wall, rolling a cigarette. Old Pop shook a puny fist, cried, "You've spoiled it all, you have! Here I've set up the nicest piece about what a fine man you were and how sorry we all are that you are dead! And now you come to life and spoil my masterpiece! Oh, well," said Pop, "I'll go through it and change the name to Ayers! He is dead and no doubt about it. They have his body!"

"Ayers?"

"Yes sir. Old Ayers."

"Who? How?"

Pop shook his head. "Nobody knows. Right through the heart. Last night it was. He wasn't liked, but who'd think he had an enemy? At least, one to do that!"

Blade finished the cigarette, eyed Weldron, still in stocking feet, bareheaded, with shirt unbuttoned but tucked into his trousers. He was more than saddle-weary. Blade had read the letter, vain with claim for credit and boastings, to his uncle. "I wonder," Blade thought, "if you had anything to do with Ayers?"

"Something's coming!" said the telegrapher. It came: "Colonel Blade, End of Track beyond Wilkson. Sir: Request granted. Hallard." Just that. No yielding to even one congratulatory word. Blade read and smiled wryly, not caring. Maybe that was what made Hallard strong. He never yielded. Would he be hurt by Ayers' death?

"Wait!" said the telegrapher. "Something else. General Harrington has been sent for."

The iron men went into action. With muscles that ached from idleness they threw commissary supplies out of a box-car. They carried a wagon-bed from the teamsters' yard, tore off the side-boards, nailed cleats on one side, supports on the other for the horses to walk up into the car.

Presently General Harrington's message came through: "Any conditions involved in prisoner's surrender?"

"Hell, no!" said Blade. "And send just that!"

"To the General?" asked the telegrapher in a weak voice.

"You are right, boy. That would be wrong. So take it this way, 'Colonel Blade respectfully begs to report, 'Hell, no!'" He looked straight at Weldron. "Only conditions involved are that Colonel Blade will hang him if engineer party is not where he says. Send that!"

The click of the sender went on and on, then stopped, and there was the hush of waiting. Soon came back: *dot dash-dot dot dot dot dot*—repeated—*dot* pause *dot dot-dot* and so on until Blade read: "Approved. Harrington."

The rescue of the engineer's party was made in the dawn. Blade, using an old cavalry trick, had his men crashing about through the woods in a way that gave an impression of great numbers. Plummer himself said, "Surrender!" and came out first. He looked like a very sick man. The others followed with hands up.

Plummer seemed to have the weary relief of a man glad it was all over; and, not knowing that Weldron had been caught, he said bitter things. "As soon as we heard you were dead, he had me come here, with a freight-wagon to follow . . . take the men back nearer Plummer City . . . he never intended to let them be released . . . hated Jack Harrington, and—" Then Blade brought Plummer and Weldron together and their exchange of remarks interested him.

Blade sent men out to meet the freight-wagon and hurry it in. It was a good vehicle for transporting prisoners!

The men who had captured the engineer's party had not known what it was about, being put to it by Plummer as a way to extort money from the railroad, and had become friendly with their prisoners.

Davids, Jack Harrington, and the three others, were dirty, unshaven, unwashed.

"Bunch of tramps!" Blade told them.

Young Hamby, called the "Kid," took off his glasses, rubbed the lenses with the cleanest spot on a dirty handkerchief, peered grinningly at Blade. "Jack said you would find us!"

"Don't be too happy, any of you!" Blade told them, smiling a little. "The only reason the General wanted you rescued is so you can be punished for disobeying orders!"

"Disobeying?" asked Davids.

"Going near Plummer City!"

"But, hell!" said Jack Harrington with forward lurch of shoulders. "We were sent to—"

Davids exclaimed, "But look here, Colonel!" and fished a soiled folded paper from his pocket. It was an order in Hallard's name to inspect and check the graders' work beyond Plummer City, immediately; and signed by Ayers.

The paper was from Hallard's office, but the signature: "Forgery—or not?" Blade could not guess.



Allie turned. "What is it, Belle? You ~~said~~." Belle laughed. "I'm sorry. . . . Colonel Blade, the Doc wants to see you—right away! He is waiting in the hall."

GENERAL HARRINGSON, in the biggest chair of the private-car parlor, rubbed his fingers thoughtfully in the deep thick beard of his cheek, blew cigarette toward Blade, peered at him through the smoke. "You are a damn' fool, sir!" The General meant it.

Blade held back the smile, nodded submissively.

"Track is being laid at a mile a day! A mile and a quarter—a mile and a half some days! Grogan says he can sweat them up to two miles, with a bonus! Those men want the road to go through. They are fighting for it—just like soldiers! And you, Blade! You admit that you gave instructions to release Royal Weldron. By whose authority, sir?"

"Yours, sir!" said Blade.

"What!" roared the General. He had no humor, and he was afraid of Blade's. He could see there was something behind Blade's set face that was trying to smile. The General eyed him, remembering other times Blade had outmaneuvered him. The General puffed a time or two, then asked cautiously, "Now just what have you got up your sleeve, Colonel?"

"I have a letter from you, sir, containing an order to use my own judgment, in any way I see fit, to promote the success of the railroad. That order has never been revoked."

General Harrington grunted and sat down, not pleased. "Go on, go on!"

"There was a time, General, when I thought the best thing possible would be to catch Weldron and hold him as a hostage. You would have disapproved of that. I knew it. I waited and waited for Weldron to give me a proper excuse. When he struck it was with the same idea of getting hostages. And he nearly won!"

"Never!" the General growled. "We would have gone on in spite of everything!" Pause. Blade remained silent. The General gestured impatiently. "Go on, go on!"

"We turned the tables. Weldron became the hostage. I released him. General, the people who have employed him, his own uncle, will never believe that he was released until he had told us everything he could. They must think that he bought his way out with admissions and confessions. They'll never trust him again in any way! For one thing, he failed. For another, they must believe he turned traitor. Without money and without prestige, Royal Weldron becomes just another frontier hoodlum. But as the 'prisoner' of General Harrington, he would remain an important figure of whom the General was—perhaps—afraid."

The General snorted, muttered gruffly: "Why didn't you explain all that to me first, sir?"

"General, sir, may I respectfully recall to your attention that, years ago, when you appointed me your Chief of Scouts you said that the reason you gave me that promotion was because when I made a fool of myself I never tried to put the blame on you!"

The General studied Blade's grin, then laughed heavily. He arose, threw his cigar away, put out his hand. "That is right, sir!" he said, and as near to humor as he could ever come, went on: "Moreover, I will have all the credit for building the road, sir! You and your wild rebel Texans—nobody again will try to obstruct our progress with those damn' fools ready to charge down upon them!—a year from now you will all be forgotten. It may interest you to know, Blade, that the Kansas Pacific Railroad Company is preparing to buy us out at a handsome figure. All we have to do is to complete our charter agreement! And," said the General, a broad smile showing through his thick beard, "I deserve the credit for building this road. By God, sir, I picked the right man to pull us out of a hole! You are still in charge, Blade! Go ahead. Be a damn' fool! I like it!"

Which was why the men who served under thunderous old Harrington swore by him. . . .

Ned Patton idly twiddled an empty whisky-glass for a long time with Blade's eyes on him, then looked up from under droopy lids. "Taggart? Overplayed my hand a little, I guess. He'd just showed me a letter that said you'd been killed. Bragged that he'd had it done."

"From Ayers?"

Patton again twiddled the glass. "How d'you know?"

"I had Ayers send it."

"Oh," said Patton tonelessly. Then, "Hm. Funny. Funny as hell!" His voice was flat. He drew a breath, spoke lazily. "Well, Taggart seemed too pleased with himself. Riled me some. He knew, or said he did, where your men were being held. I thought I'd take him out in the dark and ask him. Thought I'd make him show me where. It didn't turn out the way I planned, so I left town. Come on here. When I heard he was dead I felt bad. Yeah."

He looked straight at Blade. Their eyes met and held, and things they would not put into words came to the surface of their eyes, understandingly. Patton could see just as plainly as if it were written out that Blade knew who had shot Ayers, and why.

"Have another drink, Ned?"

"Yeah. Sure."

"In a way, too bad about Ayers. They say that wasn't his signature on Davids' order. But some do say it was Ayers that murdered Rhobb."

"Um-hm. Yeah," Patton drawled. "That would sort of help most anybody to b'lieve he wasn't lyin' when he wrote that he'd had you killed. Liars are hard to figger!"

"Here's to you, Ned."

"Same, Colonel!"

They drank, put down the glasses. Ned Patton held out his hand. "By! I'm on my way, somewhere. California, I think. She says she'll never touch another card that's—you know. I wish to God now I'd shot King Collins long ago. She knew how I felt. Made me promise not to. She hated him, at that. Women are too much for me!" . . .

By fall the town of Fenton City was already half deserted. It was, and would remain, a division point, with machine-shops and roundhouse. Its buildings were empty, or had been torn down and shipped toward the railroad's end. The population went on, ever on, seeking the end of track. The Tip-top was boarded up; the Glory Hole was almost an unremembered name; rats played over dance-floors, and spiders hung their webs from the ceilings; and men who had thought themselves rich because they owned town lots refused even to pay taxes.

A granite shaft marked the grave of Senator Fenton; and the Empire Hotel remained open, well filled because now, with rents down, nearly all of the company officials lived there. But Fenton City had ceased to be a wild noisy prosperous town. The new "Metropolis of the West," filling the sky with the roar of boom-town prosperity, was Plummer City. It was, at least temporarily, just as much of a city as speculators had predicted; but Mr. Plummer was dead. He had died in bed, like an honest man, with a doctor by him. "Pneumonia," the doctor had said. Blade thought the doctor had guessed wrong; shame and worry could kill a man as surely as pneumonia. . . .

But even in half-deserted Fenton City there came an afternoon when the barroom of the Empire House hummed with jovial babble. At sundown there would be a wedding in the dining-room, after which Mr. and Mrs. Jack Harrington would leave in the private car on a honeymoon trip to the end of track. End of track was now beyond Plummer.

THE General, Jack, even Miss Belle, had tried to persuade Allie to go East for the honeymoon. Miss Allie was sweetly gay about it, but she knew where she wanted her honeymoon; that was where she would have it. For once the General had met a person to whom he could not give orders, and he was adoringly proud of her.

Jack was proud, humble, worshipful. It never entered his head that he had any qualities deserving the affection of

such a girl or the sacrifices that she had been determined to make for him; and, as he confessed to Blade, he never would get over the guilty feeling of having forgotten Allie when he ran off in anger to propose to little Molly McVey. Jack said that he would just curl up and wither away if Allie should ever learn that he had done such a thing when all the while she had been so faithful, loyal, true.

Blade rolled a cigarette carefully and thought of lots of things, but said nothing.

Old Doc Baron looked down sadly at his liquor and, with rumbling melancholy, said, "Colonel, the old order, she changeth, sir. Peace and quiet has come 'pon our fair city." He shook his big head sorrowfully. "Damned if I like it!" He grinned broadly at Blade. "Thanks to the bets we won, I'm a well-fixed man, too. Me an' Miss Belle have been discussin' how best to protect our substance from the swindlers an' scoundrels that prey on the unwary, like us. Miss Belle, she aint yet quite recovered from the shock of discoverin' that an honest man can be smarter than us rogues and cheats. Kind of humblin' to her. And, sir," said the Doc without any humbled aspect, "to me! It's been an amazin' thing to Miss Belle to find that a man'll keep his word and give up money—when he don't have to."

Then the General, moving with a bulky strut, came into the barroom, followed by friends and company men. Hallard was with him, and Grogan; and lesser men, pleased to be included. The General shook hands with Mayor Baron.

Grogan, with no expression at all on his face, poked Blade's ribs with a thumb. "You've lost your sweetheart, Colonel. Molly's going to marry."

"Water-boy?" Blade asked.

"Like hell! What chance has an honest laboring-man got against men on horseback? It's that kid Alford of yours."

The General asked his friends to state their pleasure to the bartenders. Hallard said, "Soda." He gave a limp hand to Blade, stood with unbending sternness. His too-bright eyes burned like lanterns in tunnels. Blade said: "I have been awfully sorry about Ayers, Mr. Hallard." Hallard gazed at him with a look that sent a chill up and down Blade's back as he said in a low crisp voice, "Ayers is still with me, sir. By my side, night and day. Helping." Blade nodded helplessly and backed away.

Young Hamby, called the "Kid," ran about doing errands; he pulled at Blade's arm and, with the haste of one who hasn't a moment to spare, said, "Miss Allie wants to see you, Colonel."

Belle opened the door. "I'm just scared to death!" she whispered, smiling.

"Now what?"

"Nothing, but—" Her gypsy face was lighted with happy excitement. Companionship with Allie had made such a change that she seemed to have turned the clock back on old Daddy Time. "It means so much to have everything go as it should that I'm afraid, Colonel! And now don't you upset the child! Promise?"

FOR a few moments Blade was left waiting alone. From below he could hear the musicians tuning up. He glanced from the window. The sun was low and the slant of its rays laid a golden beam across the room.

Allie came in the midst of a foaming veil and white satin, with a wreath on her small head. She gave him her hand and smiled but her eyes were sadder. "Colonel Blade, please do let us be friends!" She put it as frankly as that.

"Friends? Aren't we?"

"You see, I have hated you because I felt that you hated me. Worse than hated me, despised me! Didn't you?" "Not after that morning in the General's car, Miss Fenton!"

"Thank you. And I would be a very selfish—well, I am that!—but I'd be stupid if I did not thank you, Colonel, because you have protected me by never saying anything to anybody about—about the silly foolish wrong things I

did!" Her small jaws set and her blue eyes brightened fiercely as she told him, "I would have died before I asked you not to!"

Blade shook his head. "Have never mentioned it."

"I know. But oh, how I have been afraid through the long nights, Colonel Blade! And I just had to say how much I thank you!"

Belle opened the door suddenly. "Colonel Blade!"

Allie turned, startled. "What is it, Belle? You sound—"

"Oh, no!" Belle laughed, "I'm sorry! I am excited. More nervous than if it was my own wedding!" For a moment even Blade believed her, but he caught the overtone of tenseness in, "The Doc wants to see you, Colonel. Right away. He is waiting in the hall."

"But what is it, Belle?" Allie insisted.

"Nothing, darling. Really! In the hall, Colonel." As Blade went by her at the door, Belle gave his hand a hard squeeze and a sidelong glance that had terror in it. Then she swirled toward Allie with, "Come on, darling! It's almost time. You can hear the music starting."

THE Doc waited gravely in the hall with his hat far back on his head, and the Kid, Hamby, held to the Doc's arm. "Tell him," said the Doc.

"The Kid's teeth rattled as he tried to say: "Out back—I just saw him—old storehouse—behind it! Oh, God, he means to—to— The wedding! I looked for you and the Doc—Doc here—"

Blade stared at Doc Baron, and the big Doc's wide brown eyes had turned hard. Blade said, "All right, Doc. I'm not surprised. We'll take a look." Then: "Listen, boy. Keep your mouth shut. No matter what happens, keep it shut! You don't know one damn' thing!" Blade jerked his head, "Come on, Doc."

They went down, passing among the musicians in the hall who were waiting to play for the bride as she descended the stairs; and the Doc, without noticing, jostled the small nervous preacher who stood with an air of whispering to himself as if going over his lines.

Blade turned to a side door, the Doc following. A waitress said: "You're going to miss the weddin'!" The Doc told her calmly: "We'll be right back."

Outdoors they started around behind the kitchen. "You wait here, Doc." The Doc fell behind, but did not wait. Blade went forward, walking around empty barrels. Shadows were beginning to deepen. Blade drew his gun and carried it waist-high, at his side, with the barrel level. A pippen fence ran toward the old storehouse. A lazy sow got up and grunted hopefully, thinking of slops. At the other side of the storehouse were the broken bows and ragged canvas of a covered wagon that had been thrown off and left there when the wagon was put to hauling.

Weldron saw him coming and thrust his revolver from a corner of the storehouse, leaning out to take aim, and Blade shot instantly. Weldron threw back his head, disappearing; but when Blade walked on to the corner, there he lay face up, on his back.

"Now," said Blade, "the War is over!"

The Doc turned to the old wagon-top, grasped with both hands and ripped off a wide piece of rotten canvas, came back and spread it. He brushed his fingers together, pulled his hat forward, said gravely: "Come on, Colonel, sir!"

The strains of the wedding-march reached them, and they walked with hurrying strides clear around the hotel and came in at the front, and stood back, looking over the heads of the crowd as the bride came down the steps on the arm of General Harrington. From the stairway behind, Belle's strained eyes searched men's faces, and she found the bareheaded Doc. The Doc slowly lifted his hand to his head and nodded.

Belle's dark eyes moved until she met Blade's look; and she did not smile, but her face glowed as if sunlight were falling upon her.

THE END

POIROT and I had many friends and acquaintances of an informal nature. Among these was to be numbered Doctor Hawker, a near neighbor of ours. It was the Doctor's habit to drop in sometimes of an evening and have a chat with Poirot, of whom he was an ardent admirer.

On one particular evening in early June he arrived about half-past eight and settled down to a comfortable discussion on the cheery topic of the prevalence of arsenical poisoning in crimes. It must have been about half an hour later when the door of our sitting-room flew open, and a distracted female precipitated herself into the room.

"Oh, Doctor, you're wanted! Such a terrible voice! It gave me a turn, it did indeed."

I recognized in our new visitor Doctor Hawker's housekeeper, Miss Rider. The Doctor was a bachelor, and lived in a gloomy old house a few streets away. The usually placid Miss Rider was now in a state bordering on incoherence.

"What terrible voice? Who is it, and what's the trouble?"

"It was the telephone, Doctor. I answered it—and a voice spoke. 'Help!' it said. 'Doctor! Help! They've killed me!' Then it sort of trailed away. 'Who's speaking?' I said. 'Who's speaking?' Then I got a reply, just a whisper, it seemed. 'Foscatini,'—something like that,—'Regent's Court.'"

The Doctor uttered an exclamation. "Count Foscatini! He has a flat in Regent's Court. I must go at once."

"A patient of yours?" asked Poirot. "I attended him for some slight ailment a few weeks ago. An Italian, but he speaks English perfectly. Well, I must wish you good-night, M. Poirot, unless—"

"I perceive the thought in your mind," said Poirot, smiling. "I shall be delighted to accompany you. Hastings, run down and get a taxi."

Taxis always make themselves sought for when one is particularly pressed for time, but I captured one at last, and we were soon bowling along in the direction of Regent's Park. Regent's Court was a new block of flats situated just off the St. John's Wood Road. They had only recently been built, and contained the latest service devices.

There was no one in the hall. The Doctor pressed the lift-bell impatiently, and when it arrived, questioned the uniformed attendant sharply.

"Flat Eleven—Count Foscatini? There's been an accident there, I understand."

The man stared at him.

"First I've heard of it. Mr. Graves—that's Count Foscatini's man—went out about half an hour ago, and he said nothing."

"Is the Count alone in the flat?"

The Italian Nobleman

Another brief but fascinating adventure in detection of our old friend Hercule Poirot. . . . A Twice-Told Tale from our December, 1924, issue.

by AGATHA
CHRISTIE

"No sir, he's got two gentlemen dining with him."

"What are they like?" I asked.

We were in the lift now, ascending rapidly to the second floor.

"I didn't see them myself, sir, but I understood they were foreign gentlemen."

He pulled back the iron door and we stepped out on the landing. The Doctor rang the bell. There was no reply, and we could hear no sound from within. The Doctor rang again and again, and we could hear the bell trilling within, but no sign of life rewarded us.

"This is getting serious," muttered the Doctor. He turned to the lift attendant.

"Is there any pass-key to this door?"

"There is one in the porter's office downstairs."

"Get it, then, and—look here, I think you'd better send for the police."

The man returned shortly. With him came the manager.

"Will you tell me, gentlemen, what is the meaning of all this?"

"Certainly. I received a telephone message from Count Foscatini stating that he had been attacked and was dying. You can understand that we must lose no time—if we are not already too late."

The manager produced the key without more ado, and we all entered the flat.

We passed first into a small square lounge hall. A door on the right of it was half open. The manager indicated it with a nod.

"The dining-room."

Dr. Hawker led the way. We followed close on his heels. As we en-

tered the room, I gave a gasp. The round table in the center bore the remains of a meal; three chairs were pushed back as though their occupants had just risen. In the corner, to the right of the fireplace, was a big writing-table; and sitting at it was a man—or what had been a man. His right hand still grasped the base of the telephone, but he had fallen forward, struck down by a terrific blow on the head from behind. The weapon was not far to seek. A marble statuette stood where it had been hurriedly put down, the base of it stained with blood.

The Doctor's examination did not take a minute.

"Stone dead. Must have been almost instantaneous. I wonder he even managed to telephone. It will be better not to move him until the police arrive."

On the manager's suggestion we searched the flat, but the result was a foregone conclusion.

WE came back to the dining-room. Poirot had not accompanied us in our tour. I found him studying the center-table with close attention. I joined him. It was a well-polished round mahogany table. A bowl of roses decorated the center, and white lace mats reposed on the gleaming surface. There was a dish of fruit, but the three dessert-plates were untouched. There were three coffee-cups with remains of coffee in them, two black, one with cream. All three men had taken port, and the decanter, half-full, stood at hand. One of the men had smoked a cigar, the other two cigarettes. A tortoiseshell-and-silver box holding cigars and cigarettes, stood open upon the table.

I enumerated all these facts to myself, but I was forced to admit that they did not shed any brilliant light on the situation. I wondered what Poirot saw in them to make him so intent. I asked him.

"*Mon ami*," he replied, "you miss the point. I am looking for something that I do not see."

"What is that?"

"A mistake—even a little mistake—on the part of the murderer."

He stepped swiftly to the small adjoining kitchen, looked in, and shook his head.

"Monsieur," he said to the manager, "explain to me, I pray, your system of serving meals here."

The manager stepped to a small hatch in the wall.

"This is the service lift," he explained. "It runs to the kitchen at the top of the building. You order through this telephone, and the dishes are sent down in the lift, one course at a time. The used plates and dishes are sent up in the same manner. No domestic worries, you understand, and at the same time you avoid the weary-

Twice-Told Tales from Blue Book—IV

ing publicity of always dining in a restaurant."

Poirot nodded.

"Then the plates and dishes that were used tonight are on high in the kitchen. You permit that I mount there?"

"Oh, certainly, if you like. Roberts, the lift man, will take you up and introduce you, but I'm afraid you won't find anything that's of any use. They're handling hundreds of plates and dishes, and they'll be all lumped together."

Poirot remained firm, however, and together we visited the kitchens and questioned the man who had taken the order from Flat Eleven.

"The order was given from the *à la carte* menu—for three," he explained. "Soup Julienne, filet de sole Normande, tournedos of beef and a rice soufflé. What time? Just about eight o'clock, I should say. No, I'm afraid the plates and dishes have been all washed up by now. Unfortunate! You were thinking of fingerprints, I suppose?"

"Not exactly," said Poirot with an enigmatical smile. "I am more interested in Count Foscatini's appetite. Did he partake of every dish?"

"Yes, but of course I can't say how much of each he ate. The plates were all soiled, and the dishes empty—that is to say, with the exception of the rice soufflé. There was a fair amount of that left."

"Ah!" said Poirot, and seemed satisfied with the fact. As we descended to the flat again, he remarked:

"We have decidedly to do with a man of method."

"Do you mean the murderer, or Count Foscatini?"

"The latter was undoubtedly an orderly gentleman. After imploring help and announcing his approaching demise, he carefully hung up the telephone receiver."

I stared at Poirot. His words now, and his recent inquiries, gave me the glimmering of an idea.

"You suspect poison?" I breathed. "The blow on the head was a blind?"

Poirot merely smiled.

We reentered the flat, to find the local inspector of police had arrived with two constables. He was inclined to resent our appearance, but Poirot calmed him with the mention of our Scotland Yard friend Inspector Japp, and we were accorded a grudging permission to remain. It was a lucky thing we were, for we had not been back five minutes before an agitated middle-aged man came rushing into the room with every appearance of grief and agitation.

This was Graves, valet-butler to the late Count Foscatini. The story he had to tell was a sensational one.

On the previous morning two gentlemen had called to see his master. They were Italians, and the older of the two, a man of about forty, gave his name as Signor Ascanio. The younger was a well-dressed lad of about twenty-four.

Count Foscatini was evidently prepared for their visit, and immediately sent Graves out upon some trivial errand. Here the man paused and hesitated in his story. In the end, however, he admitted that, curious as to the purport of the interview, he had not obeyed immediately, but had lingered about, endeavoring to hear something of what was going on.

The conversation was carried on in so low a tone that he was not as successful as he had hoped, but he gathered enough to make it clear that some kind of monetary proposition was being discussed, and that the basis of it was a threat. The discussion was anything but amicable. In the end, Count Foscatini raised his voice and the listener heard these words:

"I have no time to argue further now, gentlemen. If you will dine with me tomorrow night at eight o'clock, we will resume the discussion."

Afraid of being discovered listening, Graves had then hurried out to do his master's errand. This evening the two men had arrived punctually at eight. During dinner they had talked of indifferent matters, politics, the weather and the theatrical world. When Graves had placed the port upon the table and brought in the coffee, his master told him that he might have the evening off.

"Was that a usual proceeding of his when he had guests?" asked the inspector.

"No sir, it wasn't. That's what made me think it must be business of a very unusual kind that he was going to discuss with these gentlemen."

That finished Graves' story. He had gone out about eight-thirty, and meeting a friend, had accompanied him to the Metropolitan Music-hall in Edgware Road.

Nobody had seen the two men leave, but the time of the murder was fixed clearly enough at eight-forty-seven. A small clock on the writing-table had been swept off by Foscatini's arm and had stopped at that hour which agreed with Miss Rider's telephone summons.

The police surgeon had made his examination of the body, and it was now lying on the couch. I saw the face for the first time, the olive complexion, the long nose, the luxuriant black moustache and the full red lips drawn back from the dazzlingly white teeth. Not altogether a pleasant face.

"Well," said the inspector, refastening his notebook, "the case seems clear

enough. The only difficulty will be to lay our hands on this Signor Ascanio. I suppose his address is not in the dead man's pocketbook, by any chance?"

As Poirot had said, the late Foscatini was an orderly man. Neatly written in small precise handwriting was the inscription: "*Signor Paolo Ascanio, Grosvenor Hotel.*"

The inspector busied himself with the telephone, then turned to us with a grin.

"Just in time. Our fine gentleman was off to catch the boat-train to the Continent. Well, gentlemen, that's about all we can do here. It's a bad business, but straightforward enough. One of these Italian vendetta things, likely as not."

Thus airily dismissed, we found our way downstairs. Dr. Hawker was full of excitement.

"Like the beginning of a novel, eh? Real exciting stuff! Wouldn't believe it if you read about it."

Poirot did not speak.

"What says the master detective, eh?" asked Hawker, clapping him on the back. "Nothing to work your gray cells over this time."

"You think not?"

"What could there be?"

"Well, for example, the window."

"The window? But it was fastened. Nobody could have got out or in that way. I noticed it specially."

"And why were you able to notice it?"

The Doctor looked puzzled. Poirot hastened to explain.

"It is to the curtains I refer. They were not drawn. A little odd, that. And then there was the coffee. It was very black coffee."

"Well, what of it?"

"Very black," repeated Poirot. "In conjunction with that, let us remember that very little of the rice soufflé was eaten, and we get—what?"

"Moonshine," laughed the Doctor.

"You're pulling my leg."

"Never do I pull the leg. Hastings, here, knows that I am perfectly serious."

"I don't know what you are getting at, all the same," I confessed. "You don't suspect the manservant, do you? He might have been in with the gang, and put some dope in the coffee. I suppose they'll test his alibi."

"Without doubt, my friend. It is the alibi of Signor Ascanio that interests me."

"You think he has an alibi?"

"That is just what worries me. I have no doubt that we shall soon be enlightened on that point."

THE Daily Newsmonger enabled us to become conversant with succeeding events.

Signor Ascanio was arrested and charged with the murder of Count Fos-

catini. When arrested, he denied knowing the Count and declared he had never been near Regent's Court either on the evening of the crime or on the previous morning. The younger man had disappeared entirely. Signor Ascanio had arrived alone at the Grosvenor Hotel from the Continent two days before the murder. All efforts to trace the second man failed.

Ascanio, however, was not sent for trial. No less a personage than the Italian Ambassador himself came forward and testified at the police court proceedings that Ascanio had been with him at the Embassy from eight till nine that evening. The prisoner was discharged. Naturally a lot of people thought that the crime was a political one and was being deliberately hushed up.

POIROT had taken a keen interest in all these points. Nevertheless I was somewhat surprised when he suddenly informed me one morning that he was expecting a visitor at eleven o'clock and that that visitor was none other than Ascanio himself.

"He wishes to consult you?"

"*Du tout, Hastings.* I wish to consult him."

"What about?"

"The Regent's Court murder."

"You are going to prove that he did it?"

"A man cannot be tried twice for murder, Hastings. Endeavor to have the common sense. . . . Ah, that is our friend's ring!"

A few minutes later Signor Ascanio was ushered in, a small, thin man, with a secretive and furtive glance in his eyes. He remained standing, darting suspicious glances from one to the other of us.

"M. Poirot?"

My little friend tapped himself gently on the chest.

"Be seated, signor. You received my note? I am determined to get to the bottom of this mystery. In some small measure you can aid me. Let us commence. You—in company with a friend—visited the late Count Foscatini on the morning of Tuesday the 9th—"

The Italian made an angry gesture.

"I did nothing of the sort. I have sworn in court—"

"*Précisément*—and I have a little idea that you have sworn falsely."

"You threaten me? Bah! I have nothing to fear from you. I have been acquitted."

"Exactly! And as I am not an imbecile, it is not with the gallows I threaten you—but with publicity. *Publicity!* I see that you do not like the word. I had an idea that you would not. My little ideas, you know, they are very valuable to me. Come, signor, your only chance is to be frank with me. I do not ask to know whose indiscretions brought you to England. I

"The Italian Nobleman" (1924) by Agatha Christie

know this much—you came for the especial purpose of seeing Count Foscatini."

"He was not a count," growled the Italian.

"I have already noted the fact that his name does not appear in the *Almanach de Gotha*. Never mind, the title 'Count' is often useful in the profession of blackmailing."

"I suppose I might as well be frank. You seem to know a good deal."

"I have employed my gray cells to some advantage. Come, Signor Ascanio, you visited the dead man on the Tuesday morning—that is so, is it not?"

"Yes, but I never went there the following evening. There was no need. I will tell you all. Certain information concerning a man of great position in Italy had come into this scoundrel's possession. He demanded a big sum of money in return for the papers. I came over to England to arrange the matter. I called upon him by appointment that morning. One of the young secretaries of the Embassy was with me. The Count was more reasonable than I had hoped, although even then the sum of money I paid him was a huge one."

"Pardon—how was it paid?"

"In Italian notes of comparatively small denomination. I paid over the money then and there. He handed me the incriminating papers. I never saw him again."

"Why did you not say all this when you were arrested?"

"In my delicate position I was forced to deny any association with the man."

"And how do you account for the events of the evening, then?"

"I can only think that some one must have deliberately impersonated me. I understand no money was found in the flat."

Poirot looked at him and shook his head.

"Strange!" he murmured. "We all have the little gray cells. And so few of us know how to use them. Good morning, Signor Ascanio. I believe your story. It is very much as I had imagined."

After bowing his guest out, Poirot returned to his armchair, and smiled at me.

"Let us hear M. le Capitaine Hastings on the case."

"Well, I suppose Ascanio is right—somebody impersonated him."

"Never, never, will you use the brains the good God has given you! Recall to yourself some words I uttered after leaving the flat that night. I referred to the window—curtains not being drawn. We are in the month of June. It is still light at eight o'clock. The light is failing by half-past. *Ca vous dites quelque chose?* I perceive a

struggling impression that you will arrive some day. Now let us continue. The coffee was, as I said, very black. Count Foscatini's teeth were magnificently white. Coffee stains the teeth. We reason from that that Count Foscatini did not drink any coffee. Yet there was coffee in all three cups. Why should anyone pretend Count Foscatini had drunk coffee when he had not done so?"

I shook my head, utterly bewildered.

Poirot went on:

"Come, I will help you. What evidence have we that Ascanio and his friend, or two men posing as them, ever came to the flat that night? Nobody saw them go in; nobody saw them go out. We have the evidence of one man, and of a host of inanimate objects."

"You mean?"

"I mean knives and forks and plates and empty dishes! Ah, but it was a clever idea. Graves is a thief and a scoundrel, but what a man of method! He overhears a portion of the conversation in the morning, enough to realize that Ascanio will be in an awkward position to defend himself. That evening, about eight o'clock, he tells his master he is wanted at the telephone. Foscatini sits down, stretches out his hand to the telephone—and from behind, Graves strikes him down with the marble figure. Then quickly—to the service telephone—dinner for three! It comes; he lays the table, dirties the plate, knives and forks and so forth. But he has to get rid of the food too. He has a resolute, capacious stomach! But after eating three *tournedos*, the rice soufflé is too much for him! He even smokes a cigar and two cigarettes to carry out the illusion. Ah, but it was magnificently thorough! Then, having moved on the hands of the clock to eight-forty-seven, he smashes it and stops it. The one thing he does not do is to draw the curtains. But if there had been a real dinner-party, the curtains would have been drawn as soon as the light began to fail. Then he hurries out, mentioning the guests to the lift man in passing. He hurries to a telephone-booth, and as near as possible to eight-forty-seven rings up the Doctor with his master's dying cry. So successful is his idea that no one ever inquires if a call came from Flat Eleven at that time."

"Except Hercule Poirot, I suppose!"

"Not even Hercule Poirot," said my friend with a smile. "I am about to inquire now. I had to prove my point to you first. But you will see, I shall be right; then Japp will be able to arrest the respectable Graves. I wonder how much of the money he has spent."

Poirot was right. He always is, confound him!

A SON OF HAN

by H. BEDFORD-JONES

THE gaunt John Cavendeen, of Cavendeen & Carver, looked across the desk at his two visitors.

"I don't understand this, Miss Negli," he rasped, and motioned toward Hardesty. "We have employed this young man to do what is, frankly, too dangerous for any woman to undertake. Particularly for you, who are supposed to be dead in China."

"I'm not dead," she put in, with her bright smile.

"No," said the lawyer grimly, "but you will be. You've showed up to lend Hardesty a hand in what he's well paid to do. That's risky in the extreme. Too many people would be interested in putting you out of the way, and with you the last vestige of Chosan. . . What's your mind in the matter, Mr. Hardesty?"

Hardesty hung fire for a moment.

He knew that the Chosan Import & Export Corporation had literally been blown out of existence when the Jap air-fleets bombed Chungking. Of this once vast organization nothing remained except the claims he had been hired to collect, and the young woman beside him. He knew that after the bombing, with the offices and records destroyed, with Miss Negli's family and other officials dead, the stricken corporation had been looted right and left. Now, in America, she was hoping desperately to recover the remnants of what treachery and enemies had absorbed.

"I think," he said slowly, "that you're right. Miss Negli has turned up twice in most dangerous circumstances. The claims you've given me to collect represent enormous sums; if I succeed, I myself will be a rich man. Thus far I've won out by sheer luck, but I don't think Miss Negli should appear further, particularly if her life's in danger."

Stella Negli laughed softly.

"Being the person most concerned, I shall do as I like," she said. "My father built up Chosan Corporation, fought for it, died for it. I shall do the same if necessary. Now, what's the next job on Mr. Hardesty's list?"

John Cavendeen eyed her sharply, but was baffled by her cool defiance.

"Hm! I've prepared for him what data we have in the matter of Chosan *vs. Shu Wen, et al.*, of San Francisco." His beetling brows drew down at Hardesty with malicious satisfaction. "I hardly think that luck will avail you in this instance, sir. Here are the papers in the case, such as we have, with the usual thousand dollars for expenses." He handed Hardesty a large envelope and a roll of bills. "From what little we know of him, this Mr. Shu Wen seems to be a most unpleasant person."

"Oh!" exclaimed Stella Negli. "Is he the man who bought Chosan's two steamers?"

Cavendeen nodded. "Precisely. Eight hundred thousand dollars remained unpaid; the ships were resold by him. Chosan was destroyed; there was no one to press the claim. Shu Wen went through bankruptcy, was discharged. The claim still remains unsettled. Shu Wen is one of the wealthiest men in Chinatown, out in Frisco. And there you are, Mr. Hardesty."

Hardesty smiled and glanced at Stella Negli.

"Will you lunch with me?"

"I'm hungry as a bear! Good-by, Mr. Cavendeen. I'll let you know my address."

They left the office, which was on upper Fifth Avenue. In their taxi,

Hardesty absent-mindedly fingered the scar on his cheek, which remained from his New Orleans adventure.

"Old Sourpuss seems to think he's handed me something this time that can't be hurdled," he observed. "I have the distinct notion that he doesn't like me."

"Not you; just the whole idea. It seems fantastic to him."

"It is fantastic," said Hardesty. "I was picked up out of nowhere and set to do the impossible, at a princely salary if I succeeded. I'll get a third of this eight hundred thousand if I collect it. Well, I'd sell out mighty cheap."

She laughed. "Yes? That's a fib and you know it! When do you leave for Frisco?"

"Haven't thought about it. I'd like to see something of you, first; suppose we put in a few days playing around."

"No. I'm catching the two o'clock train for Washington. That steel formula you got back in New Orleans has been deciphered and translated; I'm handling its disposal, to our own defense people and the British. . . I'm dying to see what's in that envelope Mr. Cavendeen gave you."

Over their luncheon-table, Hardesty opened the envelope, drew out a sheet of paper and scowled at its few lines of typing. Cavendeen never wasted words:

"Shu Wen, or in English, James Wen Shu; 43, Oxford and Harvard. At present occupies small office on O'Farrel just off Grant, under name of On Leung Trading Company. Financial interests unknown, supposedly wide. Acquitted last year of alleged complicity in murder of Wilson Harnes, Chinatown importer. Active in Chinese war-relief work."

Hardesty grimaced and passed the chit to Miss Negli, who read it and nodded.

"I see. Doesn't look very hopeful. What shall you do?"

"Go West, young woman. Probably by plane tonight, if you really won't stick around." Hardesty met her dark eyes, so vital and alive, and plunged earnestly. "Look here, I hardly know you; yet you've come to mean so much! Won't you give me a day or two to get



This third impossible task undertaken by Jim Hardesty of "Some Call It Luck" leads to a terrific adventure in San Francisco's Chinatown.

Illustrated by
Frederic Anderson

acquainted? It's a small thing to ask!"

The delicate golden oval of her features seem to chill. She made a gesture that checked him. "Wait, please!" She seemed flurried, almost frightened. "Before you talk like this, there's so much you should know! I don't think you realize just what you're saying."

"I do." Hardesty smiled, looking into her eyes. "You make one think of exquisite and lovely vistas; I want to say all sorts of things to you, and I realize all they imply, too."

"But you don't know who wrote the poem about the Eight Gates," she said in a low voice.

Despite her gentle tone, Hardesty sensed a hard urgency in the words, as though they were of tremendous importance. He felt checked and baffled.

"No, I don't."

"Then, until you do—and you must find out for yourself—you must not talk in this fashion. Our friendship must remain quite impersonal."

"But it was you who first mentioned that poem to me!"

A flush crept up her cheeks.

"I said only four words: 'Eight are the gates!' That meant nothing, Mr. Hardesty. It was an impulsive utterance; you must forget it. If you won't accept my request, I must leave."

"No; I'll be impersonal as a pump-handle," he said almost bitterly. "But, when I find out who wrote that poem, I can say what I like—is that it?"

Her slight smile gave tacit assent.

Later, when he put her into her taxi and said good-by, she gave him her hand and smiled.

"Thanks for doing as I ask. You'll know why, later. Good-by, and the best of luck!"

HE went to his own lodgings, moody and thoughtful. He had seen this girl facing danger unafraid, tortured and despoiled yet unbroken; he had seen her smiling and light-hearted, as well as gravely poised and aloof. He had by a lucky chance learned in its entirety the quotation which had sprung to her lips, unfinished, at almost their first meeting: "*Eight are the gates, and I shall set my heart at each, until you come!*" He now knew that it was ut-



Hardesty groped his way out with her . . . got her to the steps. Behind, all remained dark.

tered by separated lovers in China, where the poem was famous; he perceived why she had been ashamed of that impulsive thought, provoked by a stranger . . . but why was it so important to learn who had written the poem? Why lay so much stress on something that could not matter in the least?

That night he was winging westward in the substratosphere, still thinking more of her than of his futile errand. For he felt that it must be futile and doomed to failure—but he went ahead.

San Francisco greeted him with no hint of luck—fog and a drizzle of rain, an emergency landing, the trip finished by train. The omens were bad. It was evening before he checked in at the Palace; it was the next day before he saw Chinatown and the office of the On Leung Trading Company. An unpretentious office, not large. He merely walked past the door and glanced in as a man came out. Then he wandered about Chinatown.

Eight hundred thousand—nearly a million dollars! Strange enough that he, who only a short three weeks ago had been penniless and down if not out, should now hold a power of attorney that enabled him to settle a claim for such an amount. . . . Stranger still that he was directed to collect this fantastic sum from a little one-horse outfit that could not legally be compelled to pay a penny!

"It's ridiculous, it's preposterous; in other words, it's cockeyed!" he told himself angrily. He was sauntering along Grant Street past the tourist bazaars; faced by the absurd reality of his errand, he was in a bitter mood.

Crossing a street, he glanced at the sharply mounting hill to his left, at the equally sharp fall to his right, where a cable-car was toiling upward. Behind him, car brakes squealed hastily, shrill voices burst forth. A knot of small saffron children had been at his heels when a taxicab swung around the corner hastily. They were scattering. The cab was halted; one child, a boy, had been knocked down and was held against the cobbles by the bumper. The driver, with a storm of vicious curses, put the car in motion, not seeing the boy.

'Look out, you damned fool!' With a shout, half of warning, half of horror, Hardesty leaped at the cab. The driver snarled, kicked open his door, and was out with a furious oath.

"Who ye calling names? I'll learn ye to butt in—"

Hardesty's fist knocked him back against his own cab; then, seeing the squalling but uninjured boy underfoot, he stood slack-jawed. Hardesty stooped and extricated the boy. There was a rush of people, yellow and white, and a policeman strode up, just as the driver came to life and began to hurl accusations at Hardesty. On all sides voices dinned up angrily; Hardesty set the boy down and straightened.

"Sure I hit him," he said to the policeman's question. "He'd have killed the kid, in another minute!"

The crowd was ugly; the driver climbed back into his cab and waited there, while the officer importantly took down names and addresses. Then he turned to the driver.

"Scram! And you're lucky I don't take you in for reckless driving! Lay any assault charge against this man, and what you'll get will be plenty. Scram!"

The taxicab swung off down the hill. Hardesty grinned at the officer and drew clear of the jabbering crowd around. The boy had vanished.

Sauntering on aimlessly, Hardesty realized that he had come well out of the affair; it might have developed into a nasty brawl with attendant publicity, which he did not desire. He was utterly at a loss how to go about his business with Mr. Shu, and was desperately seeking some suggestion as to an angle of approach. To walk in and present such a claim, against such a man, would be sheer nonsense.

Thanks to his past success, money was no longer a prime objective. Attracted by a handsomely embroidered robe in a shop window, he entered the place with the idea of sending it to Miss Negli as a present. Then he remembered that she had lived in China. Her father had been killed in Chungking; she herself had been hurt in that bombing. A Chinese robe would hold no allure for her; she probably had finer ones already than he could buy.

DIVERTED from his intention, he poked about the shop counters and finally bought a grotesque little goldfish carved from red agate; the shopgirl agreed to send it by mail, and Hardesty wrote out a card to Miss Negli, care of Cavendish & Carver. The Chinese girl looked at it and glanced up, a smile in her eyes.

"Almost a Chinese name, Mister!" she said gayly.

"Eh? How's that?" Hardesty demanded. The girl pointed to it, and took the pencil.

"Negli. Same as Ng Li; a famous poet of ancient China, before Confucius."

Hardesty laughed at her joke, paid, and left the shop; but he gave no thought to the incident. Stella Negli had nothing of the Chinese in her makeup, unless it were the black eyes and the lovely complexion like faint rose-petals heightened with gold. He was thinking of something else. He abhorred sneaking and trickery. He had determined to go straight to Mr. Shu and get the worst over at once. Then he would know where he stood. He walked back down Grant Street briskly, and encountered the policeman who had taken his name at the scene of the fray. The officer crooked a finger at him.

"I don't think you'll have any trouble with that bird, Mr. Hardesty; but in case you do, look me up. Flaherty is the name—Chinatown detail. I'll take care of things."

"Thanks very much," said Hardesty, and went on. No, he thought with a chuckle; not likely the taxicab man would make any trouble!

HE encountered no delay in his interview. An outer room held several Chinese girls at desks; the private office was small and crowded. Mr. Shu was not large, but he was very wide in the shoulder; obviously, a powerful man. His features, too, were wide, solid, heavily boned, with heavy-lidded black eyes, but he was smiling genially as he shook hands.

"Mr. Hardesty, representing Chosan? Glad to meet you. Sit down," he said amiably. "And what can I do for you, Mr. Hardesty?"

"Pay me eight hundred thousand dollars," said Hardesty gravely.

Mr. Shu's geniality vanished. He offered his visitor a cigarette, took one himself, and held a match to each.

"I thought so. Do you really expect to collect that claim?"

"Not by process of law."

Shu Wen looked at him for a moment, as though appraising this slow-spoken, dark, intent young man with the firm lips and undeviating gaze. Then he nodded.

"I see. You've been given the account to collect if possible. You've only a superficial knowledge of the matter. You're an honest man, capable, not shrinking from direct action; and not hopeful of results—because you're dealing with a scoundrel."

Hardesty's lips twitched. "Nobody said you were a scoundrel. Otherwise—"

"A good guess, eh? Suppose I offered to compromise the matter?"

"I have full power to settle," said Hardesty. "Then you admit the debt is just?"

"Let's not talk like children." The other leaned forward, speaking ear-

nestly. "I'm an American citizen; I was born here, I was given the best available education; but the blood of Han remains the blood of Han. Our people, Mr. Hardesty, do not forget a kindness, even beyond the grave; nor is an injury ever forgotten. Some years ago, the man who founded the Chosan Import & Export Corporation deeply injured my father."

MR. SHU relaxed comfortably; he was enjoying himself now, it appeared to Hardesty.

"In return, I caused Asiatic great vexation," he pursued. "And finally, that old injury to my father cost them eight hundred thousand dollars. Further, I was instrumental in breaking up what remained of the corporation, after its virtual destruction in the bombing of the Chinese capital. I trust that you catch my drift?"

Hardesty nodded. Those black eyes were malignant as the devil's own.

"You make it fairly obvious, Mr. Shu. Why do you offer to compromise the debt?"

"I don't. I merely asked a question, to see how far your powers extended."

Shu Wen chuckled amusedly, like a boy, a very evil boy. Beneath his mask of bland geniality Hardesty sensed a quiver as of deep and deadly forces at work. "No; we cannot make a deal. The only person with whom I would talk on the matter is Miss Stella Negli. I understand that she is the only one of the family who escaped the Japanese bombs."

"If you have any offer to make, I'll relay it to her," said Hardesty.

"So you know her! You are lucky; they say she is very beautiful. Well, there's a possibility." Mr. Shu frowned thoughtfully. "You'll understand, of course, a man does not write a check for eight hundred thousand dollars—a man in my position, at least."

"A man in your position is one who might well do so," Hardesty said with irony. The other flung him a look and a slow smile, and nodded.

"You, too, have a certain sense of humor, eh? I have an idea." Mr. Shu glanced at his wrist-watch. "Hm! The bank is closed now; too late today. After all, why should I cling to a hatred that is ended? I've more than squared my account with Chosan. . . . Negli is dead, the spirits of my ancestors have not lost face, the past is closed." Mr. Shu seemed thinking aloud. He turned to Hardesty with decision.

"I will discuss this matter with you; then, if we reach an agreement, with Miss Negli. Is that satisfactory?"

"If she consents," said Hardesty cautiously.

"Very well. Come here at eleven tomorrow morning; I shall be ready."

Mr. Shu was most cordial, shaking hands and seeing him out personally.

Hardesty returned to the Palace in baffled perplexity. The only address he had for Stella Negli was in care of Cavendeen & Carver; it was now long past closing-time in New York. He sent her a night-letter explaining the situation and Mr. Shu's demand that she discuss a settlement, provided one were reached.

He received a reply in the morning, before he was out of bed:

IMPOSSIBLE TO REACH MISS NEGLI
HER WHEREABOUTS UNKNOWN AT
PRESENT.

JOHN CAVENDEEN.

Hardesty crumpled up the message furiously. He did not believe a word of it.

He faced his morning appointment warily. He distrusted Mr. Shu; he almost feared him. Those malignant black eyes lingered at the back of his mind, haunting him, a presage of evil. The whole man was evil, a mingling of the worst in two civilizations, one inherited, the other acquired. Yet Mr. Shu had something to propose; so he must be heard.

AT ten-thirty, a special-delivery air-mail letter was handed into his room. Hardesty tore it open expectantly, only to find a dry note from Cavendeen, enclosing the formal claim of Chosan against Shu Wen. He pocketed it angrily; as he did so, the phone rang. He picked up the receiver and answered.

"Good morning, Mr. Hardesty!" came her voice, blithe and cheerful.

"Good Lord! You!" For an instant he could only stammer. She laughed lightly.

"Yes. I finished my Washington business quickly and came on here, to see if I could be of any help."

"You can! You can! I must see you at once. Where are you?"

"Is it urgent?"

"Vital—I'm to see Mr. Shu at eleven."

"In the lounge. At once," she said, and rang off.

Hardesty, in fevered haste, went downstairs. She was here, in this hotel! Despite Cavendeen's warnings, despite what peril it might hold for her, she had come to help, if help could be given; and she could give it by her decision, if nothing more, in this matter. . . .

He clasped hands with her joyfully. "When did you get here?"

"This morning, by plane. Sit down and tell me about it."

He tried to collect himself into sanity; now, as always, her presence intoxicated him. She was dressed simply, in the best of taste; in repose her features were not beautiful, but in animation they radiated life and energy. Her black eyes, thought Hardesty, were the most gloriously vital things he had ever seen.



She listened in frowning silence to his story. Then:

"No, I won't see him, I won't discuss anything with him," she said quietly. "I'll help you in any other way. You don't understand! This man was, and is, a vicious enemy; he hated my whole family, he hates me. It's a life-passion with him. You may make any settlement you like, but I'll have no contact with him. Anything we can salvage out of that claim is pure velvet, so count me out and do what seems best."

Hardesty went to his appointment, after she had consented to meet him for dinner, here in the hotel, this same evening at seven. And, he told himself, she had decided well. In view of the circumstances Mr. Shu Wen was not to be trusted in the least. The thought of any danger might seem ridiculous; but the malignity of those heavy-lidded eyes was something to dream about.

This morning, however, Mr. Shu was laughing, affable frankness itself. He greeted Hardesty cordially, placed a chair for him, and with an air of mystery pointed to a large flat wooden box on his desk. He was, indeed, al-

most effervescent with unmistakable good humor.

"There is the coffin," he said, "in which will be buried forever the animosity I have cherished toward the family of Negli! Yes, I've thought about it and decided that it would be only worthy of me to end this matter once and for all, in a fitting manner. I suppose you, like most people, Mr. Hardesty, do not know a great deal about jade?"

"Eh? Why, no," replied Hardesty.

"There are many kinds and colors." Mr. Shu lit a cigarette, lounging easily in his chair. "From the ancient Han jade, no longer found, to the article of tourist commerce that crowds the bazaars. I'm going to show you something else; the true gem jade, so rare and so valued that a mere tiny button made of it runs into four figures. Ornaments of it can be worn only by queens. In fact," and he touched the box as he spoke, "this belonged to the old Empress Dowager, whose collection was unique. This has been lost for nearly fifty years—that is to say, it has been hidden away."

He leaned forward, touched a release, and the lid came open. Lifting

out the box, Mr. Shu handed it to his visitor.

"This will speak better than I. Look at it."

Hardesty pulled back the lid to disclose jade such as he had never seen; a necklace and other articles, the *parure* of an empress. The jade was all of a deep and glorious green, exquisitely worked and polished, a green so richly alive as to glow with lambent fires.

"Lord! I never saw such jade!" exclaimed Hardesty.

"You never will again, except in tiny pieces," said Mr. Shu complacently. "Its intrinsic value is half a million here; in Japan, twice as much. Its historic value is much greater; it was

imposed a condition impossible to meet. I wired the New York lawyers representing Miss Negli, last night, and they answered that they could not locate her, for the moment."

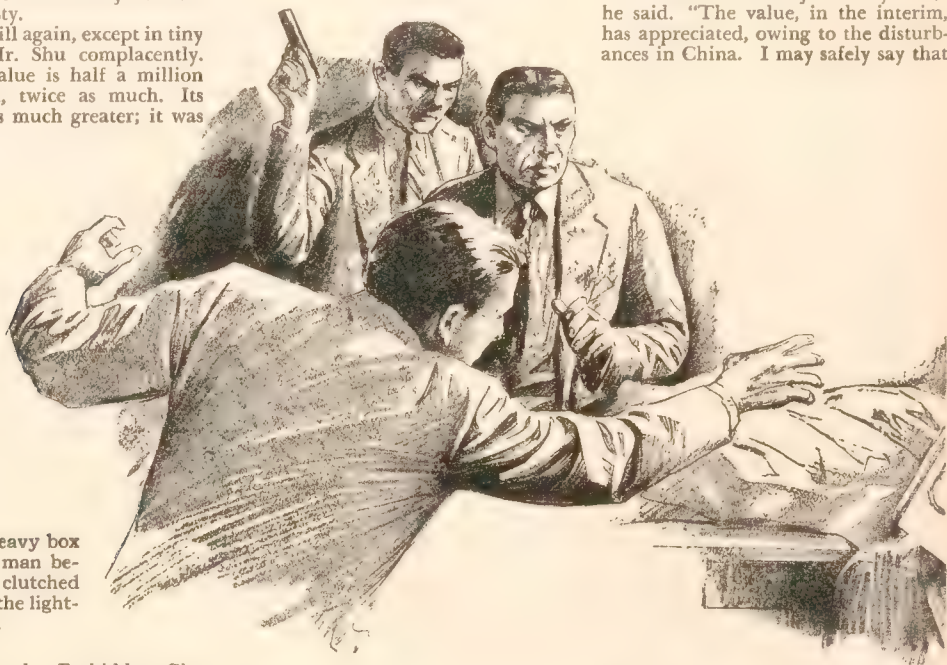
The black eyes flashed mockery at him, he fancied. "So? That is too bad. What is your opinion in the matter? That is, in regard to my offer."

"It seems fair enough," Hardesty said slowly. He knew well that he

been laughing at him; the mockery of those black eyes refused to fade away. He could not understand it. . . .

Noon was at hand. Just ahead was the very jewelry house whence that appraisal had come; on impulse, Hardesty turned in at the doors. Upon stating his business, he was taken to the office, where he was received by the member of the firm who had signed the letter of appraisal, and who now authenticated the letter.

"I remember those jades very well," he said. "The value, in the interim, has appreciated, owing to the disturbances in China. I may safely say that



He swept the heavy box straight at the man before him . . . clutched the cord above the light-cluster.

accumulated in the Forbidden City over a century and more. It is perfectly matched, unique in the world."

Hardesty touched the glowing green stones with hesitant fingers.

"Value aside, it is lovely, unutterably lovely!" he said. "You are very kind to show it to me."

"Not kind; purposeful," Mr. Shu corrected him smilingly. "It is my idea to present this outfit to Miss Negli in settlement of the Chosan claim against me; that is, if she accepts."

Hardesty stared at the green jade, his brain on the race. Shu Wen must know nothing of her presence in the city; this offer shocked him, startled him, argued that the man's protestations were sincere—yet he could not reveal that she was here. He distrusted everything. Mr. Shu picked up a letter and handed it to him.

"Here is an appraisal from the leading firm of jewelers in the city, Mr. Hardesty. It confirms my estimate of the value. If you like, you may have the jade appraised for yourself."

Hardesty looked up. "I don't doubt the value. Unfortunately, you have

could not hope to get anything better out of the man. There was no reason to doubt the appraisal in his hand. Such jade as this could not be forged or counterfeited. "I'd be inclined to accept, frankly; but the best I can do is to report the offer by mail to Miss Negli, since you insist upon a personal interview."

"And if I waived the point?" asked Mr. Shu.

"Then I'd accept."

"Very well." The other pressed out his cigarette. "Keep that appraisal; send it to her if you like. Suppose we await her response; there is no hurry. If anything turns up, each of us knows where to contact the other. You said you are at the Palace, I think?"

Hardesty assented. Upon this, the interview was ended.

As he walked down Grant toward the Plaza, Hardesty could not get away from the feeling that Mr. Shu had

those jades are unique. May I ask whether you are thinking of their purchase?"

"It is possible," said Hardesty.

"Then I advise that you have them brought to us first, to be certain you are buying the identical stones. There will be no charge."

"You think there may be a substitution?"

"That is hardly possible; if you are a judge of jade, it is impossible. No, it would merely make us feel more secure, the reputation of the house being involved."

Hardesty went his way. He no longer doubted Mr. Shu; this was now something that necessitated a further discussion with Stella Negli.

Reaching the desk, he inquired for her and drew blank; she was unknown. He was, at first, staggered, until it occurred to him that she might be registered under another name. He described her; all to no result.

"Then," he said, "will you endeavor to locate her elsewhere? Spare no ex-

pense. Canvass every hotel in the city and Bay district."

"That's a large order, Mr. Hardesty," came the answer. "We'll let you know."

AT two o'clock the office reported utter failure. Hardesty, however, was not greatly concerned. She was to meet him here at seven for dinner; and he did not blame her for endeavoring to hide herself in the meantime.

Seven o'clock arrived, and passed. Hardesty paced his room, worried, angry, conscious of his own futility. No word from her, no call! Seven-

"Good evening, Mr. Hardesty!" came the bland voice. "Too bad we must have more rain, isn't it?"

"You! What does this mean?" exclaimed Hardesty.

The other laughed.

"Oh, merely a matter of policy! Calm yourself; I did not wish to leave my name at the hotel. Miss Negli is expecting us."

Hardesty chilled. "Miss Negli?"

"Yes. You did not want to tell me she was in the city, eh? However, after her visit to your hotel this morning it was not difficult to contact her. She consented to see me, the entire affair is now settled amicably, and I'm taking

ing. Miss Negli has agreed; I am ready to close the deal."

Thunderstruck by the whole affair, Hardesty fought for a clear brain. He took no stock in Shu Wen's words; but the salient fact remained that Stella Negli's talk with him that morning was known. She had been followed, then; he himself must have been under observation.

"Where is she now?" he demanded. "What have you done to her?"

"Nothing. My dear sir, what would you expect me to do to her? Please be sensible. This display of a pistol is merely to restrain any absurdity on your part. Miss Negli is awaiting us; she is quite unhurt, there is no need of any alarm."

The car, meantime, was roaring westward over the steep hills. Hardesty, who did not credit a word told him, tried in vain to get some sense of location; the rain baffled him. He was trying to conquer the tumult in his brain when the car slid in toward the curb and reduced speed. It halted.

"Here we are!" exclaimed Mr. Shu cheerfully. "After you, Mr. Hardesty!"

Hardesty got out; the man with the pistol followed his movements like a shadow. Shu Wen joined them. The car shot away into the misty drizzle.

They stood before a house that rose high upon a tufted embankment, with steps leading up from the sidewalk. Mr. Shu mounted the steps; Hardesty and his shadow followed.

As they set foot on the porch, a light flashed on. Mr. Shu pressed a bell; the door was opened by a yellow man who bowed and stepped back.

"Tell the professor that I have returned and am ready," said Mr. Shu. "Come along, Mr. Hardesty."

They entered a hall, and Hardesty, at a gesture, passed into a room on the right. A room cheaply furnished in imitation Oriental style, closed at the far end by old-fashioned sliding doors.

Mr. Shu, who had brought a parcel from the taxicab, laid it on the table.

"This is not my house, you will understand," he observed, and touched the parcel. "However, here are the jades. Examine them, assure yourself, and then—"

"Damn the jades! Where's Miss Negli?" demanded Hardesty.

"Awaiting us, as I told you." Mr. Shu was no longer genial. His voice came harshly. "You are here to obey, not to dictate. If you want to see Miss Negli at all, do as I say!"

THE slouch-hatted yellow man, and his pistol, pointed the command. Hardesty was bewildered; if his signature were extorted by force, it would be illegal. Yet he was glad enough to compromise and settle the claim at this price. Why should Mr. Shu want to pay such a price, or any price at all, for what he could take forcibly?



thirty came and went. He had begun to be alarmed, now. Either she would not or could not, meet him.

Eight o'clock. The phone rang; with unutterable relief, he jumped at it.

"This is the porter's desk, Mr. Hardesty. A car is here for you. Market Street entrance."

He hung up blankly. A car? Perhaps Stella Negli had come like this; it must be she! He caught up hat and coat and was out of the room upon the instant.

A drizzle of rain was falling when he reached the street. The doorman had an umbrella ready and took him to the curb; the car waiting there was a taxicab. Stooping, Hardesty got in; the door slammed behind him, the car leaped into motion so suddenly that he was flung upon the rear seat. A light flashed for a moment. He saw a man on either side of him, and one of them was Mr. Shu.

you to her now. She insists that you alone have the power to settle the Chosan claim—"

"You're lying like hell!" blurted Hardesty. "This is no way to do the thing; she would have phoned me!"

"Why not pretend you believe me?" said Mr. Shu. "Why force an unpleasant issue? It is much easier to accept the inevitable; besides, I am not alone."

He lit a cigarette while speaking, and the match-flame disclosed the other man in the car—a slant-eyed Oriental who held a very large and efficient-looking automatic pistol.

"So this is a snatch, is it?" exclaimed Hardesty. "Well, I can't object! I'm not armed. But you'll get nothing out of me, I can tell you!"

"Yes, your signature in settlement of the claim," said Mr. Shu. "In return for the jades you saw this morn-

Reaching out to the box, he opened it. There were the jades; he examined the heavy silverwork that held them together, and it was the same. No tricker here, apparently.

Mr. Shu read his expression and smiled widely.

"No, no, I am not interested in legality," he said. "This is a private joke, all my own; I have a sense of humor, you comprehend. But Chinese humor is unique, Mr. Hardesty. Have you a copy of your bill against me?"

Producing the document that had come by airmail, Hardesty took the pen handed him and acknowledged the settlement in full, in consideration of the Empress Dowager jades.

"Take them; they are yours," said Mr. Shu, reading the words and nodding. "You shall put them on Miss Negli, if you like."

Hardesty clicked the lid tight shut and picked up the box. It was heavy; it required his two hands. The incongruous thought struck him that he was holding, thus, a half-million dollars or more. Mr. Shu pocketed the receipt and smiled again, more widely.

"The humorous aspect of the matter is," he said blandly, "that you will not live to enjoy this fortune very long. Come."

He went to the folding doors and tugged them apart. Hardesty followed, with shadow and pistol at his elbow. The doors slid wide apart, and the room beyond was disclosed.

The room was of some size; a cluster of shaded electric bulbs on a cord hung low above a long central table occupied by a white-shrouded object. Beside this table, looking at them, stood a short, spectacled man; Hardesty knew him for a Japanese, even before hearing the name.

"Professor Taira, this is Mr. Hardesty," said Mr. Shu. "He will be interested in seeing the greatest tattoo artist in the world at work. There is the model, Mr. Hardesty."

Mockery, malignant and exultant, filled the words; Hardesty scarcely heard them. He was looking at the figure beyond, standing negligent and

unashamed. The face was that of an Asiatic, the dull and vicious face of a woman of the lowest class; but the body—

With a start, he saw that she was not clad at all. Her body, from neck to ankles, was a solid mass of intricate tattooing, of the most shameless and revolting designs imaginable. Through Hardesty's bewilderment pierced a nameless sense of horror, a vague and terrible oppression like a premonition.

"What's all this nonsense?" he demanded. "Where's Miss Negli?"

Professor Taira bowed slightly to Mr. Shu, sucked in his breath, and spoke.

"Please, one moment. My assistant forget the pigments; he returning immediately, yes."

"There's no hurry," said Mr. Shu. "Oh, Miss Negli, eh? She's on the table, quite unhurt. She's merely asleep. Show her face, professor."

The Japanese pulled aside the shrouding cloth. Hardesty saw that beneath it was Stella Negli, dressed as he had seen her that morning, her features relaxed and unconscious. A wild, incoherent oath burst from him; the pistol jabbed into his back, and he stood silent.

Mr. Shu lighted a cigarette. "So; there is no more need of pretense, Mr. Hardesty. It is true that my animosity toward the Negli family is about to be ended forever. You shall see

the beginning, but not the end; you will join your ancestors very shortly."

"I don't get it," rasped out Hardesty, thick-voiced. "What deviltry's going on? What have you done to her?"

"Nothing, except to put her to sleep." Mr. Shu's lips drew back, showing his teeth in a snarl. "Did I not tell you that no son of Han forgets a benefit or forgives an injury? It would give me no pleasure to kill this young woman; that would do her no great harm. No. I want her to curse the name of Shu Wen to her dying day! I want the spirit of her father to writhe in shame and horror; I want my own ancestors to know that they have regained face, that this accursed Negli family has been given the final iota of punishment! You see that woman yonder? Look at her naked body, no longer naked; Miss Negli will be a replica of that woman, thanks to Professor Taira's ability!"

A quiver seized Hardesty. It was all so calm, so matter-of-fact, so hideously fantastic and yet so real!

"You can't do this—you can't!" he cried out. "No devil out of hell could do such a thing!"

"Oh, it will cause her no pain, or very little," said Mr. Shu, puffing at his cigarette. "When she wakes up it will be all over. A pity that you'll not be alive to inspect the work, Mr. Hardesty; but you must go to your ancestors presently. If you attempt any interference, you shall be shot. That would be a pity, for the professor's hand must remain quite steady. Your needle is ready, professor?"

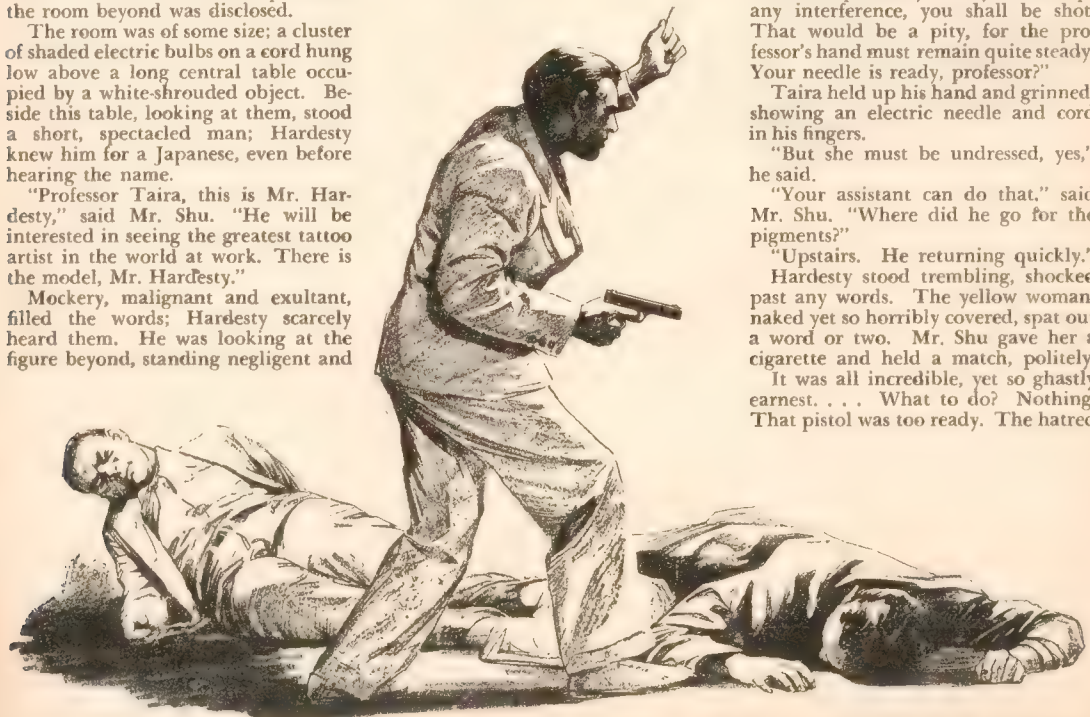
Taira held up his hand and grinned, showing an electric needle and cord in his fingers.

"But she must be undressed, yes," he said.

"Your assistant can do that," said Mr. Shu. "Where did he go for the pigments?"

"Upstairs. He returning quickly." Hardesty stood trembling, shocked past any words. The yellow woman, naked yet so horribly covered, spat out a word or two. Mr. Shu gave her a cigarette and held a match, politely.

It was all incredible, yet so ghastly earnest. . . . What to do? Nothing. That pistol was too ready. The hatred



He struck a match. Taira lay at his feet, behind him the shadow.

of one man, the callous disregard of these others, the deliberate finesse with which the trap had been set and sprung—under the realization, Hardesty stood white and shaken. He could not credit it, yet knew it was true.

"Here, take the damned jades, call this thing off!" he cried hoarsely. "If it'll do you any good, go on and shoot me! But don't do this inhuman, diabolic thing to her! . . . Why, it would ruin her life!"

"That is precisely my intent," said Mr. Shu, dropping his cigarette and stepping on it.

Hardesty stared at Taira, horrified by the man's utter indifference. The Jap looked at the naked woman and gestured with the needle. She came closer to the table, under the cluster of lights, which brought out with revolting clarity the red and blue patterns encircling her.

To be helpless, helpless! There was no chance of any kind, no opening, no opportunity; that yellow shadow with the pistol was deadly. At a sound, Professor Taira turned.

"My assistant, returning now," he said.

A door opened across the room. Another man came into the room, a brisk little brown man, also spectacled. He bowed respectfully to Mr. Shu and handed Taira a tray on which were pots of pigments. Then, glancing at Hardesty, his face changed. Astonishment, recognition, came into his eyes. He threw up his hand and said something in his own tongue.

TAIRA uttered an exclamation. But Mr. Shu had evidently understood, for he swung around and stared at Hardesty in astonishment, in dismay, in sharp agitation.

"Is that true?" he cried out. "I don't know what you're talking about, damn you!" said Hardesty. A horrible fury was working like yeast in his brain; he wondered if he were going out of his mind. One chance, one chance—but he had none. There was nothing he could do.

"He says it was you—that you were the man!" cried Mr. Shu. A violent spasm of emotion swept across his animal features, his nostrils quivered, his black eyes were dilated. Words burst from him in a gust; obeying them, the yellow shadow stepped back and dropped his pistol. He, too, was staring at Hardesty, whose bewilderment increased.

"What is this, some of your damned humor?" he returned.

Mr. Shu shook his head.

"No, no! That it was you who did that thing yesterday . . . for the little boy, for your son!" His voice shrilled with agitation. "Is that true?"

"Oh! You mean the kid under the taxicab?" Hardesty recollected the in-

cident. "Was that kid your son? I wish to hell I'd known it—"

And like a flash, he swept the heavy flat wooden box straight at the man before him. Not at Mr. Shu, but at Taira, who had turned and was fingering the throat of Stella Negli. The corner of the box struck him at the base of the skull, full force. Then, with a leap, Hardesty clutched the

"The Gate of Mercy"

The famed labors of Hercules himself were no more exciting or difficult than the tasks undertaken by Jim Hardesty. Don't miss the fourth episode of "Some Call It Luck," in our forthcoming January issue.

hanging cord above the light-cluster and dragged it down.

A sharp bluish flame leaped in air as the wires snapped and shorted, blowing out the fuses.

The pistol exploded with a roar of sound; the Chinese woman was shrieking, Mr. Shu was shouting something. Hardesty, crouched beside the table, the lamp-cluster gathered hot between his fingers, hurled it at the pistol-flash. Another report, as the bulbs exploded; another bursting shot, wild, the flame leaping in air. Hardesty flung himself forward, struck a figure in the blackness, and knew it was the yellow shadow. He found the pistol-hand and wrenched, struck savagely, struck again.

A shrill, agonized cry broke from the yellow man. The pistol fell; the man crumpled under Hardesty's fury and went limp. Merciless, Hardesty bumped the man's head against the floor, hard. He groped around, and his fingers closed upon the pistol.

Thus armed, he waited grimly. Nothing happened. Silence engulfed the room, the darkened house. He straightened up, took a step, groped; his hand struck against the table. His foot struck against something hard; it was the wooden box. He stooped, felt the box between his hands, snapped it open. Scooping up the jade ornaments, he dropped them into his pocket. Then, erect, he struck a match.

Taira lay at his feet. Behind him was the crumpled figure of the shadow. On the table was Stella Negli; otherwise, the room was empty.

A LITTLE later, staggering under his burden, Hardesty groped his way out to the veranda steps. The rain had thickened; water splashed down from the eaves-trough. He set Miss Negli on the steps, wet his handkerchief, and mopped her face; she might be, poetically, moon-glints on

distant water, but physically she was a girl of normal weight.

A sobbing breath escaped her, a flutter of words came from her lips. Hardesty urged her, got her to her feet, helping her to the street steps. As they descended, he saw the lights of a taxicab coming along the street below, and whistled. The cab slowed. Behind, all remained dark and silent.

In the cab, he held her in his arms, supporting her, until she drew away. "What is it? What has happened?" she faltered. "Where are we?"

"Going to the Palace. I'll get you a room there for the night. Feeling bad?"

"Terrible. My head's all swimming."

"Never mind. Don't talk about it now; wait till morning."

She sighed, and her cheek drooped against his shoulder. . . .

Hardesty awakened to sunlight flooding in at his window. He lay drowsily, only half roused. Through his mind ran the words of the ancient Chinese poet she had once quoted to him in part, and which other lips had completed for him:

"Eight are the gates, and I shall set my heart at each, until you come."

WHY had it been so important that he learn the identity of the writer? All Chinese poets, dead or alive, were alike to him. Yet she had thought it vital, for some reason. . . .

"Holy smoke!" He sat up in bed, saw it was morning; across his brain rushed the memory of everything, that incredible hell-scene under the cluster of lights, the recognition by Taira's assistant, his own frenzied actions. Or had it all been a wild dream?

He leaped out of bed. His clothes lay tumbled in a chair; he plunged at them, and from his coat pocket caught out a necklace of resplendent green, vivid and alive with sun-glints in the light. Real! Everything was real. She was safe here, in this hotel . . .

Something white under the door caught his eye. He went to it and picked up a yellow envelope, a telegram addressed to him. He tore it open and blinked at the message.

ALL ACCOUNTS ARE CANCELED; MY SON IS WORTH MUCH JADE. ONE BENEFIT WIPE OUT MANY INJURIES. GIVE MISS NEGLI MY RESPECTFUL REGARDS. —SHU WEN.

A deep breath escaped Hardesty. He swung around, caught up the telephone, and spoke.

"Give me Miss Negli's room, please . . . Miss Stella Negli."

After a moment came response; his tension relaxed. It was her voice, sleepy, a trifle bewildered, but still her voice; so all was well.

"Good morning!" he said happily "About breakfast, now—"

A BOOK-LENGTH NOVEL—COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

FORTY WHACKS

Our old friend Detective Campbell of "Finders Keepers" fame deals with an even more fascinating problem in murder.

by GEOFFREY HOMES



OUT on the river, a man was singing. He was playing a guitar and singing "Sam Hall." A ghost of a moon and a big crop of stars was visible in the pale sky, and under it the river ran darkly, bank-full. It was April and the Sierra snows were melting. It was April, and the wind from the foothills smelled of lupin.

Soft, the girl thought—so soft, the wind, you could rub it between your fingers like velvet. She sat on the bank above the bridge, her arms locked around her bare legs, chin resting on her knees, and looked at the river. There was a little barge anchored above the bridge, and there was a small fire burning on the barge. The singer was sitting by the fire and you could see the dark bulk of him and you could hear his fine deep voice singing the mournful gallows-song. She wondered who he was. She had been wondering who he was for the past ten minutes, ever since she found this bank of warm sand in the shelter of the willows and cottonwoods.

Suddenly she stood up, stretched her lithe body, plunged into the cold, dark water and struck out toward the barge, swimming strongly and easily, letting the current sweep her down and out; and then her fingers caught the stern of the flat boat, and she pulled herself along and hung there. His broad back was toward her.

"Hello," the girl said.

The man stopped singing. He swung around and sat there holding the guitar in his lap.

"You left out a verse," the girl said. "You left out the verse about the preacher."

The man grinned. He was youngish and very big. He wore overalls and a blue shirt, and his feet were bare. They were large feet. The hand that lay on the belly of the guitar was big, too. She couldn't see the other one.

"I'm cold," the girl said. "May I come in?"

"Will you teach me that verse?"

"When my teeth stop chattering."

He was on his feet, towering above her, towering above the rough shelter at the back of the barge. She felt the strength of his fingers, found herself standing beside him looking up at him.

"Thanks," the girl said, and crouched by the fire. She took off her bathing-cap and shook her hair down over her eyes. The firelight made it almost red. "Duck-bumps," the girl said. "I'm covered with duck-bumps."

"Here," the man said. He bent down and rummaged in the rude cabin, came out with a jacket, tossed it to her. "Not that I don't like to look at you. You are very good to look at. You should always wear a bathing-suit."

"You're being forward," the girl said. "I'm a nice girl—a working-girl with a fine character. My name is Robbie Vance, and I don't talk to strangers."

"I'm not a stranger," said the big young man, smiling.

"What do they call you?"

"Joe," the man said.

"Just Joe?"

"That's right," the man said. "How does the verse go?"

"I can't carry a tune," Robbie said. "I'll have to say it. Then you can sing it. . . . It comes after the first verse," she went on. "Like this: 'The preacher, he did come, he did come! Oh, the preacher he did come, he did come. And he looked so blank-blank glum, as he talked of Kingdom Come—' I like that. Don't you like that?"

"I'm religious," Joe said. "It offends me. That's probably why I never learned it."

He sat down again, took up the guitar and started picking at the strings with his left hand, and singing. She noticed that his right hand was stiff, wooden. There was a glove on his hand, and then she knew why. She put a finger in her mouth and bit it.

Joe stopped singing. "None of that," he said. "If I can stand it, you can."

"It's lovely," Robbie said. "You sing beautifully."

"I didn't mean the singing. I meant the hand. There isn't any hand. There used to be, but it got whacked off."

"Oh," Robbie said.

"With an ax," Joe said cheerfully. . . . "I was beside myself. I was bitter. I wept, I raged. I loved that hand. Like a brother, I loved it. Then I waxed philosophic. A hand: four fingers and a thumb. A useless thing, really."

ROBBIE spread her hands out in front of the fire, stared at them. "I need mine. I couldn't eat without them."

"That's what I thought."

"But you're not a stenographer."

"No."

"I am. That's why I'm here. I'm celebrating. Tomorrow I go to work. My first job."

"Up there?" He waved his good hand toward a cluster of lights where the little village of Pollasky clung to the hill above the river.

"No. Joaquin."

"What sort of job?"

"A private detective."

"Show me your badge?"

She laughed. It was a fine laugh with humor in it. "I'm not a detective. I'm a detective's secretary. He just opened an office in Joaquin."

"I don't like detectives."

"He's nice," Robbie went on. "His name is Humphrey Campbell, and he looks fat but isn't. At least he says he isn't. I haven't poked him to find out."

"Don't," Joe said. "He might misunderstand."

"He would."



Miss Topham let out a bellow, and dropped the boat. One of the Scouts shrieked: "In the boat! A body! Nekkid!"

"A private detective's private secretary," Joe said. "That's getting very private, isn't it? Is this Campbell any good?"

"Do you need a detective?"

"Not now," Joe said. "You never know."

"I think he is," Robbie explained. "He doesn't say. His partner does. His partner is a big fat man named Oscar Morgan, and I think he drinks a lot. His partner says that the firm of Morgan and Campbell is the best detective agency in the world. He says it is the only honest one in existence."

"You live in Joaquin?"

Robbie nodded.

"Why?" Joe asked. "Why would anyone live in Joaquin. It's flat and it's hot and it's corrupt."

"You seem to know the place."

"I should." He didn't explain. He asked: "Live alone?" He sounded hopeful.

"Nope. Boarding-house."

"No relatives?"

"Not a relative."

"Lucky girl," Joe said.

"Not so lucky. I like families. Why do you live here?"

"Why not?" He waved at the river. "Where better?"

"But how—"

"Do I eat? Gold, my girl. In the bed of this river there is gold. Not much. I pump up mud and sand, and run it through a sluice, and sometimes I make two dollars a day. For me, a fortune."

"I should think—" She didn't finish the sentence. She was looking at his right hand again.

"That a big fellow like me could find something better to do? Something better than sucking mud from a riverbed? No, Robbie. It's not the hand. It's the soul. The soul needs peace, and the river moving by, and the night. The soul needs stars. And a soft wind blowing."

"Yes," Robbie said. She lay back and saw the sky.

"The soul was sick," Joe went on, and he seemed to be speaking to himself. "Sated and sore and sick. And there was darkness."

"Because of the hand?"

"Only a little. Because of a great many things."

"Can you escape from life?"

"Yes," Joe said. "You can lie here and listen to the river and watch the stars. You can close your eyes to it, shut your ears to it. Then perspective returns. Trouble? With the world going to pot, what do you matter?"

"It won't go to pot," Robbie said. "I refuse to give up hope for it. There are good people and kind people and sweet people."

"And the pure and the meek," Joe said. "And the meek will inherit the earth."

"I tell you I believe."

"I believe in night," Joe said. "I believe in the river and the hills and the stars. I believe in that husk of moon. But I don't believe in people. Oh, I'm not bitter. I stopped being bitter awhile back. I've become part of the vegetable kingdom, Robbie. And the mineral kingdom. I've renounced the animal kingdom."

"You think you have, but you'll be swept downstream," Robbie said. "Whirled into life again. You wait, Joseph. Something will happen." A star streaked down, and she watched it go. "Like that."

"God forbid!" said Joe. "You're young, Robbie."

"There's love," Robbie said. "You find it, and then you get young again."

"I said I'd renounced the animal kingdom. Cabbages and rocks can't love."

"Was she beautiful?" Robbie sat up and smiled at him. He didn't answer. He hit one of the guitar strings and let it vibrate. "The reason for the state of mind. Was she, Joseph?"

"Go away," Joe said.

"You see, I know," Robbie went on. "I've been through it too. I eat the symptoms. The sick soul, the darkness.

The longing to be a vegetable—a head of lettuce or a cabbage. Anything without feeling. The longing for peace, and the river and the sky. That's why I came to Joaquin. That's why I'm going to work tomorrow. That's why I came out here tonight."

"She was beautiful," Joe said. "She still is. But like the hand, she's only part of it."

"Sure?"

"Oh, yes." He made his voice gay. "There's my mother-in-law."

"Oh," Robbie said.

"My ex-mother-in-law, rather," Joe said.

Robbie spread the coat on the deck, stretched out on it. Joe threw some kindling on the fire, watched it flame, watched the shadows move across the girl's body.

"I was married too," Robbie said softly, talking to the sky. "It didn't work. But—it's nice how life is, isn't it? How it lets you get over things."

"You never get over things," Joe said. "You tuck them away, but they're always there. If you aren't careful, they come out now and then and bite you." He hit the strings again, and then he started singing. Robbie knew the song. She had a recording of it made by Carl Sandburg. It was a cowboy's lament. She wondered if he would mind very much if she sang very softly. She had the tune in her mind. When it came out, it wouldn't sound as it should, but in her mind it was right. With a thrust of pain, she remembered how Harry had yelled exasperatedly at her to "stop that awful noise!" . . . Over? Well, almost over. She sat up suddenly.

"I've got to go," Robbie said. "Tomorrow I'm a working-girl." She was on her feet, looking down at him.

"A water-sprite," Joe said, stopped his strumming, and waved at the river. "Into your element, then."

"Good night."

"Good night. You know the way back here."

"I know the way," Robbie said, and plunged into the dark stream.

When she clambered up the bank to her car, she looked back and listened. He had stopped singing. She could see the flicker of firelight marking the spot where the barge lay at anchor. But she couldn't see the man who called himself Joe. She shivered, found her bathrobe, wrapped it tight around her, got into the car and drove away.

CHAPTER TWO



HEN Humphrey Campbell stepped into the one rickety elevator in the Cooper Building, there was another man in it, a fellow who vaguely resembled an apple dumpling. He wore a straw hat with a bright band, and a brown suit with stripes that wouldn't have looked well even on Gary Grant. Humphrey looked casually at the man, realized that the face was familiar, then gave his attention back to the elevator operator, a very passable blonde in a green sweater and white slacks. He said: "Good morning."

The blonde smiled. She returned the greeting, called the other man by name. She said: "How's the golf, Mr. Beaumont?"

"Wonderful," said Beaumont. His smile had a good many teeth in it. There was a suggestion of a paunch above his belt.

As the elevator jerked skyward, Beaumont addressed Humphrey. "Aren't you Campbell?"

Humphrey nodded.

"We're neighbors," Beaumont said, and put out a chubby hand. He had a good grip and knew it. "I'm Frank Beaumont, Attorney. Just across the hall."

"I knew I'd seen you before," said Humphrey. "The billboards."

"Not bad, eh?" Beaumont beamed.

"Not at all bad," said Humphrey. "I like that slogan—'Frank H. for Honest Beaumont—Frank to his friends—Honest to his foes.' It verges on the classic."

Beaumont's teeth showed his pleasure.

The elevator stopped. "Here we are, Mayor," said the operator. Humphrey wondered if there was sarcasm in the girl's tone. If there was, Beaumont didn't notice it.

"Sounds good, doesn't it?" said Beaumont. "Well, Miss Perkins, we may take you out of this old rattletrap and put a touch of beauty in the City Hall. How would you like that?"

"It would leave me speechless," said the girl, and closed the doors. There was a window near the elevator shaft.

Beaumont stood a minute, looking with a proprietary air at what he could see of the city. The little man sucked his lungs full of air and expelled it noisily. "Feels good today. Nothing like Joaquin in April. Look at those trees." He inspected Humphrey. "You ought to get in some golf, Campbell."

"That isn't fat," said Humphrey. "That's muscle." The remark was beginning to pall on him.

"Piece in the paper about you," said Beaumont. "See it?" "Not yet."

"Good piece. Ought to bring the new firm business. Maybe I can throw a little your way." His eyes were thoughtful.

"We can use it," said Humphrey. They walked side by side down the hall. The door of Beaumont's outer office was open. A prim woman in a white high-necked shirt-waist sat very straight at the desk behind the railing, looking efficient and virginal.

"Be seeing you," said Beaumont.

"In the city hall," said Humphrey. He gave the dark-haired virgin a small leer and crossed the hall to the new quarters of Morgan and Co. He paused a moment in front of the door, reading the inscription on the opaque glass. It looked impressive. "*Private Investigators*," it said. Much better than the inscription on the door of the moth-eaten Los Angeles office. He opened the door and grinned at Morgan and Company's newest bit of office furnishing. It had been a wise move to hire Robbie Vance, even if her shorthand and typing weren't all they should be. Miss Vance had other qualifications which needed no letters of recommendation. Class, Oscar had said. A patrician. Humphrey withdrew the word. *Lovely* was better—lovely and clean and sweet. Nice lips, not too full.

"Good morning, Mr. Campbell." Robbie seemed a little breathless. Scared, Humphrey knew. The first day. He liked her better for it.

"He in?" He inclined his head toward the door marked *Private*.

Robbie nodded. "Half an hour."

"Good humor?"

"I gave him the paper," Robbie said. "That made him feel better. I think he had a bad week-end."

"He always has bad week-ends," Humphrey said. "He should drink milk. Anything happen yet?"

"A man called for an appointment."

"Good."

"He said he was the district attorney."

"Not good," Humphrey said. "I don't like district attorneys. When is he due?"

"Ten."

Humphrey went through the door marked *private*. "Hello, Father Brown."

"It's quarter to ten," Oscar growled. Aside from a red cast in his eyes, he looked well enough. He had shaved, and his white hair was beautiful, though the red in his eyes didn't match his saintly appearance. Mirrors of the soul, Humphrey thought—the soul of a bloody pirate.

"What does the district attorney want?" Humphrey asked.

"I care not one whit," said Oscar. "Have you seen the atrocity they call a paper in this town? We're made, son!"

Humphrey perched himself on the corner of the desk, spread the morning *News* on the immaculate blotter. There was a box in the lower right-hand corner. The head read: "*Murder, Stay Away from Our Door.*"

"Whimsical," said Humphrey. He read the half-column of type. It was very flattering. It said that the two famous Sherlocks, Humphrey Campbell and Oscar Morgan, had chosen Joaquin as the scene of future operations.

"Los Angeles' loss is Joaquin's gain," a subhead read. The story went on to list a few of the cases solved by Morgan and Company. It dealt particularly with the murder of Stephen Dunecht, which was natural, for the Dunecht case had had Joaquin in an uproar not very long before.*

"All good," said Humphrey. "Whom did you bribe?"

"He was a nice young man—too nice for bribes," said Oscar. "A very earnest young man just out of Joaquin State college. He will go far in the field of journalism."

"With that feeling for truth? He will." Humphrey ran his eye over the front page. Two columns were devoted to the war. Two more were devoted to Frank H. Beaumont and his campaign. There was a fine picture of Beaumont at his desk, and the caption under the picture indicated that he was a cinch to defeat the incumbent mayor, T. Elliot Price. Apparently their neighbor had the *News* sewed up, Humphrey thought.

"An auspicious start," said Oscar and opened the bottom drawer.

"Yes," said Humphrey. He watched a fat hand appear with a bottle in it. The inter-office phone dammed the flow of liquid down Oscar's throat. He returned the bottle to the drawer and picked up the receiver.

"Yes?" Then he scowled. "Send him in." Humphrey knew from his expression that the district attorney of Joaquin county was outside.

Robbie opened the door, stood aside. A lean man with a hard-bitten look and a shock of gray hair came in. With chaps and a big hat, he would have made a fine cowpuncher. A homemade cigarette dangled from his lower lip.

"Mr. Hyatt," Robbie said, and closed the door.

MR. HYATT. Humphrey thought, seemed a bit scornful as he inspected the new office. Above Oscar's head was a framed diploma from the Bavarian Institute of Criminology—quite mythical; above that was an old squirrel-gun with a pair of handcuffs looped over the barrel. On the opposite wall was the Morgan coat-of-arms.

"Morgan," said Hyatt, looking at the coat-of-arms. "Any relation to Henry?"

"Grandson," said Humphrey. "Sit down, Mr. Hyatt."

"Thanks." He sat.

"Drink?" asked Oscar. He opened the drawer again and took out a quart bottle of Scotch, two tall glasses and a siphon. He filled both glasses. Humphrey got up, gave Hyatt one of them.

"Nice of you," said Hyatt, and tossed off half the glass.

"What can we do for you?" Oscar asked.

"You can watch your step," said Hyatt.

"My dear fellow!" said Oscar.

"Don't tell me how ethical you are," said Hyatt. "I know all about you. If I'd had my way, you wouldn't be here. But I am not, I regret to say, a member of the police commission which issues licenses for detective agencies. With your friend the chief of police pulling for you, I could do no more than protest."

"That was big of you," said Humphrey.

"I know all about you too," said Hyatt. "That little matter in Key West, for instance."

"I was young," said Humphrey. "How was I to know there was a law against bringing beverages from Cuba? Anyway, the Government has long since forgiven me."

"A reformed character," said Hyatt. "Well, watch your step. I know why you moved up here."

*The Dunecht murder case was solved by Humphrey Campbell in "Finders Keepers," which appeared in our February, 1940, issue.

"Your insinuations are offensive." Oscar put hurt in his tone. "Very offensive, Mr. Hyatt. This is and has always been a law-abiding firm. When the State legislature took its unreasonable stand in the business of locating heirs, what did we do?"

"You came here," growled Hyatt.

"Exactly. We closed our office and entered a new field, an eminently respectable field. Pinkerton-Burns—" He waved his hand.

"You were lucky in the Dunecht case," said Hyatt. "You got yourself a reputation out of that. You'll need it. The minute you pull one shady deal, I'll be right there with a warrant." He finished the drink, smiled at the two men. It wasn't a nice smile. He added: "We have a lousy jail in Joaquin. It's old and damp, and the food is horrible."

Oscar brought his hand down on the desk. "Mr. Hyatt, have you read the Bill of Rights?"

"Yes," said Hyatt, and stood up. "So long, gentlemen." He waved languidly, and Humphrey was certain some-one must have told him once that he looked like Gary Cooper. He did, a little.

"So long, pardner," Humphrey said.

Hyatt smiled bleakly and was gone. He left the door open.

Humphrey sent a low and very vulgar sound after him, rose and crossed to the door.

He didn't close it. There was a woman standing in front of Robbie Vance's desk, a tall, broad-shouldered woman in a tailored gray suit and a blue felt hat with a broad brim. It reminded Humphrey of the campaign hat his grandfather had worn in the Civil War. The woman wasn't pretty but she looked kind, and her ankles were good.

Robbie nodded toward Humphrey. "You can see them now," she told the woman.

"Come in," Humphrey said.

CHAPTER THREE



HER stride was long, her manner brusque. She didn't tarry over words, but clipped the ends off some of them and left syllables out of others. Her voice, Humphrey decided, belonged in the alto section of the choir. "I'm Mary Otis," she said, as though certain the two men would know who Mary Otis was. She flicked a glance at Oscar's bulk, another at the diploma over his head, and you could see she didn't put much faith in Oscar's powers of deduction. Then she favored Humphrey with a searching stare. It was more respectful.

"Mr. Morgan," Humphrey waved at Oscar. "I'm Campbell. Sit down."

"Thanks." A cigarette-case came out of the pocket of her jacket; she snapped it open, tapped one of the cylinders on the back of her hand, put it in her mouth and lit it. She sat down, crossed her ankles, and surveyed the room. "I hope you measure up to the office and the piece in the paper."

"We can try," Humphrey said. "What can we do for you, Miss Otis?" He sniffed the smoke from her cigarette, and wondered why women liked that brand.

"I'm looking for a man," Miss Otis said. "I could find him myself if I had time. But I haven't the time." She flicked ashes on the rug. "I'm a busy woman. Some people call me an agent. I call myself an artists' representative." Humphrey put on his impressed look. He wondered if he should give Miss Otis an ash-tray or let her burn holes in the new rug. The rug wasn't paid for, so he decided on the latter. "I'm in Joaquin to arrange for the appearance of Aram Arkelian, the violinist," she added.

"And he's lost?" said Oscar.

"No, he isn't," said Miss Otis. "He is in San Francisco. Aram is my reason for being here, that's all. The man

I want you to find is Joseph Borsden." She allowed them a couple of minutes to digest the name. Then she said a little scornfully: "I take it you don't know much about music."

"I play the accordion," said Humphrey.

"That isn't music," said Miss Otis.

"You hurt me," said Humphrey.

"Sorry," said Miss Otis. "Joe Borsden is a pianist, and a good one. I handle only the best."

"He's missing?"

The word seemed to irritate her. "There's no mystery to it. I can't find him, that's all. He's somewhere around Joaquin, but I can't locate him. So I came to you. What are your fees?"

The question pricked Oscar into action. He said: "That depends."

"On how tough the job is," Humphrey added.

"I don't think you'll have much trouble," said Miss Otis.

"Suppose we decide on the fee later," Humphrey said. "Now, how about Borsden?"

Miss Otis flipped her cigarette in the direction of the wastebasket, and it arced neatly into the receptacle. "I represented Mr. Borsden for five years," she explained. "A year ago in March he was on tour. In the middle of it, he canceled all engagements. I haven't seen him since."

"He came here?"

"Yes. His home is here."

"Have you tried his home?"

"It has been sold."

"His family? Has he any?"

"A wife and a boy. And a mother. I don't know where his mother lives, exactly. On a ranch near Santa Paula, I think. His wife, at the moment, is here with her mother. She is the daughter of Gertrude Ellen Peck. I hope you know who she is?"

"I do," said Humphrey. "She owns the *News*."

"And she's a—" Miss Otis matter-of-factly applied a coarse epithet to Mrs. Peck. "Her daughter," she added, "is another. They know where Joe is, but they won't tell me."

"Perhaps Borsden doesn't want to be found?"

"I dare say. Nevertheless, I want to see him while I'm here."

"Would it be impertinent to ask why?"

"It wouldn't. He means money to me. I want to put him back to work."

"How long will you be here?"

"I'll be in the valley two weeks. I'll make my headquarters here. At the Joaquin Hotel."

"It doesn't sound too difficult," Humphrey announced. Oscar cleared his throat. "I don't know about that, Campbell. One never can tell."

"Look here," snapped Miss Otis, "you're dealing with a business woman. I told you if I had the time, I could find him myself. If you want to be reasonable, all right. If not, I'll go to someone else."

"We are always reasonable," said Oscar.

"I'll give you fifty dollars now," Miss Otis said. She had her purse open. "Find him for me within a week, and there's two hundred more. How about it?"

"Fair enough," said Humphrey. "What's his mother's name?"

"Mrs. Josephine Borsden."

"Have you heard from Borsden since he dropped out of sight?"

"Once. I had a note from him," Miss Otis said. "In May of last year. It was postmarked from here."

"What did he say?"

"That he was through, that he would never play again."

"You've written to him since?"

She nodded. "He didn't answer."

"Did he give any reason for walking out on you?"

"No. I think I know why."

"Wife trouble?"

"Yes. I learned today she divorced him last October. Here. She charged desertion."

"You didn't know about the divorce before?"

She shook her head. "It didn't make the papers. I discovered it by"—she looked pleased with herself—"using my head. I went to the county clerk's office. It's apparent what happened. Mrs. Peck owns the only paper here. She had her reporters kill the story."

"Who was her attorney? Did you notice?"

"A man named Beaumont."

"Frank and Honest," said Humphrey. He smiled happily.

"What?"

"He's running for mayor," Humphrey said. "That's his campaign slogan. His office is right across the hall."

"I know it. I've seen him."

"You haven't overlooked a bet, have you?"

"I don't overlook bets. He says he doesn't know where Borsden is. He's lying, probably; anyway, I don't like it."

"We'll need a picture," Humphrey said. He stood up. "And a description of Borsden."

"Of course." From the blue bag she took a portrait, held it out. Humphrey studied it. Borsden had a strong, pleasant face, a good face. There was nothing remarkable about it.

"He's big," Miss Otis said, and now there was a softness in her voice. "Tremendous. Six feet four at least. Pale hair and blue eyes. Very blue eyes. He has—well, a happy look about him."

Watching her, Humphrey was sure that there was another reason why Miss Otis wanted to find Joseph Borsden, a reason that had nothing to do with music. And the knowledge made him pity her a little. He said kindly: "We'll take care of it, Miss Otis."

"Thank you," she said brusquely. She took some bills from her purse, rose, crossed to Oscar's desk and dropped them on the blotter. "If I'm not at the hotel, leave word. Good morning, gentlemen." She left them.

"I abhor efficient women," said Oscar as the door closed. "Now, that one: She isn't a bad-looking wench. But—" He sighed.

"You're too old, anyway," Humphrey said. "And too fat." He picked up the phone. "Baby, get me Mrs. Peck at the *News*. Tell her I want to see her about a full-page advertisement."

"Yes, Mr. Campbell," Robbie said.

"And how about lunch?" said Humphrey.

"No, Mr. Campbell," Robbie said.

CHAPTER FOUR



RS. PECK'S secretary was a man. The brass plate on his desk said his name was Mr. Swett. He could have sold corsets. He said: "I'm sorry, Mr. Campbell; you'll have to wait. Mrs. Peck is occupied now."

If you judged it by its appearance, the outer office had nothing to do with a newspaper. It was bright and shining, with streamlined furniture and an inch-thick carpet. There were two others waiting to see Mrs. Peck, sitting together near the door, and not until Humphrey turned from Mr. Swett's desk did he see them. One was Frank H. Beaumont. His companion was a lean fellow, sieck as a seal in expensive gray flannel. Humphrey wondered if he was selling oil stock. He had that look.

Beaumont bobbed his head, smiled. Humphrey smiled back, took a magazine from the table and put himself down on the couch near the door marked *Private*. It was an exceedingly comfortable couch, which was fine. By the looks of things, he had a long wait ahead of him.

He opened the magazine and started to read about a handsome young fellow working behind a lunch-counter who looked up and saw a beautiful girl in a mink coat cry-

ing into her soup. What the girl was crying about, Humphrey never discovered, because things started happening behind the door with the private sign on it.

A woman's voice yelled: "Get out of here, you —"

A man laughed. A man's voice said: "I should have split your head open. I intended to."

"You didn't have the guts," the woman yelled back.

"I may do it yet," the man said.

"Get out."

"I'm getting," the man said. A door slammed. You could hear Mr. Swett being horrified. Beaumont and the gray seal were rolling their eyes at each other and grinning.

"You should soundproof these offices," Humphrey said, smiling at Mr. Swett. The secretary's face stayed frozen.

A buzzer on Mr. Swett's desk ripped him out of his chair, sent him scurrying for the door and through it. Humphrey got a glimpse of an oak-paneled room and a picture of a sour man in uniform.

"I like newspaper offices," Humphrey said. "Things are always happening around them." He opened the magazine again, but he was wondering why her visitor was a so-and-so—and why he should have split her head open. Mrs. Peck would be in a fine mood. She would probably fall all over him when she found out he didn't want to buy a full page.

The door opened. Mr. Swett stood in it. "Come in, Mr. Campbell," he said.

Beaumont and the seal had risen. They sat down again and scowled. Humphrey walked with all the dignity he could muster into the presence of the owner, publisher and editor of the *Joaquin News*. The door closed. Mr. Swett had left him to his fate.

A woman in a soft green outfit that didn't come from any Joaquin shop, a woman with a fine figure and blue-white hair. Around fifty, Humphrey decided. On the wall to the right of the desk was the picture of the sour guy in uniform, who, he assumed, was Mr. Peck; he did not seem worthy of Mrs. Peck.

Her recent outburst had put color in her cheeks, but it seemed to have left her unshaken. She said, pleasantly, "Good day, Mr. Campbell. Sit down."

"Thank you." He sat. He liked the office; it had a fireplace in it.

"Your secretary said you wished to discuss an advertisement?" Her voice was a little too thin.

Humphrey nodded. "It's an odd advertisement. That's why I came to you rather than the advertising manager."

"Yes?"

"I want to advertise for a lost man," said Humphrey.

She arched her eyebrows. He saw that her skin was white and fine. "A full page?"

"He's an important man," said Humphrey. "A very important man."

"Get to the point," Mrs. Peck said, and her voice didn't make him feel so welcome. Her eyes were the color of slate, and just as hard.

"His name is Joe Borsden." Humphrey threw the name at her as though he were pitching a soft-ball to a four-year-old kid.

She didn't speak. Her head told him where the door was. He said: "A friend of mine writes for the *San Francisco Recorder*. They sell the *Recorder* on every street corner in Joaquin. My friend would like a piece about Joe Borsden being divorced and lost."

"Shall I have you thrown out?"

"I don't think Mr. Swett could do it, Mrs. Peck."

"Probably not," said Mrs. Peck. She eyed him speculatively and without anger. "What do you want with Joe Borsden?"

"Nothing," said Humphrey. "I want to know where he is, that's all."

"Why?"

"A client."

"Who is your client? What's the name?"

"All right. I'll put my cards on the table," said Humphrey. "My client's name is Mary Otis. She wants to see Borsden."

"Perhaps he doesn't want to see Miss Otis. And perhaps I don't know where he is."

"Frank Beaumont does, and he was your daughter's attorney."

Her eyes had sparks in them; her voice didn't. It needed defrosting badly. "I can have your license revoked in five minutes."

"I can get my *Recorder* friend on the phone in less time than that."

She put her elbows on the desk and her chin on her knuckles. "I don't like threats, Mr. Campbell."

"Nor publicity," said Humphrey mildly. "I've no interest in your reasons for killing the divorce story, nor your reticence concerning Joe Borsden. I don't want to see him. Mary Otis does, and she hired me to find him. I can do it without your help, but it would involve work, and I don't like work. And I want the *News* for a friend. You can get my license revoked. You can run a beautiful story about it. But—"

"What?"

"You took the trouble to kill the Borsden divorce story, Mrs. Peck. You want it to stay killed."

Her eyes gave her away. There was fear in them; and she knew it, for she pulled her lids down, and her long lashes made shadows on her cheeks.

"The secret will be kept," Humphrey said. "Before I pass on the information you give me, Miss Otis will promise to keep her mouth shut."

She didn't look at him. She didn't speak.

"The less nosing around I do and Miss Otis does, the better," Humphrey said.

She found her voice. "What makes you think you can trust the Otis woman?"

"Borsden is—or was—her client. She won't do anything to hurt him. All she wants to do is ask him to go back to work."

"She's wasting her time. He won't go."

"You're very sure," said Humphrey.

"Yes," said Mrs. Peck, and she kept her gaze on the blotter. "I'm very sure—he'll never play again."

"Then the sooner she finds it out, the better," Humphrey said.

She spoke very quietly. "I don't want Miss Otis to see him."

"She'll see him despite you. You may as well accept it."

"Yes." Her hands dropped on the desk. "I suppose she will. All right. He's on a barge—living on a barge in the river above the Pollasky bridge."

"Thanks."

"I'm being fair to you."

"I appreciate it. I think you'll find that guys in my racket keep their mouths shut."

"And their clients' mouths?"

He nodded, stood up. He thought that Mrs. Peck looked very helpless and very feminine. He wondered how long it would be before she started figuring ways to cut his throat. "Come and see me again, won't you?" She sounded pleasant enough.

"I'll serenade you," he said. "I'll stand under your window and play the accordion, and you can throw roses down."

"That would be lovely," said Mrs. Peck. He went out and closed the door. He was glad he wasn't Frank H. Beaumont, who was headed for Mrs. Peck's office. He was glad he wasn't a member of the *News* staff, because he was certain she was going to be a very difficult woman for a while.

AND when he saw the next edition of the *News*, late that afternoon, Humphrey realized how right he had been. *Difficult* wasn't the word for Mrs. Peck. Beaumont's picture no longer graced the front page. In its place was an

impressive photograph of the man who had been sitting beside Beaumont in Mrs. Peck's outer office—the mayor, T. Elliot Price. In the place of the story praising Beaumont was one telling what a fine mayor Mr. Price was, and how he should be reelected. Humphrey whistled to himself. The whims of newspaper publishers! Didn't they give the readers credit for any intelligence?

CHAPTER FIVE



OME men were putting a twenty-four-sheet on a billboard in the vacant lot across the street from the Cooper Building. It showed a meek little man having his pockets picked by a pig-faced gentleman labeled "*Public Utilities*." Looking hungrily on, was an animated slot-machine with his arm around a wench in a very low-cut dress. Off to the left was the city hall, and T. Elliot Price was leaning out of the window smirking at the scene. "*Make May 5 clean-up day*," the billboard suggested. "*Elect Frank H. Beaumont*."

The poster made Humphrey think of the sudden between editions switch in the *News*' policy, and wondered if the presence of Price and Beaumont in Mrs. Peck's office had anything to do with it. A voice rasped at him. There was a girl in a sun-suit standing at his elbow, and she had a box of buttons in her hand. She had a nice smile, so he let her pin a T. Elliot Price button on his lapel. Then he saw Robbie coming along the street. Robbie was much more attractive than the button girl, he decided. He fell in step beside her.

"Nice," said Robbie, throwing a glance toward the button girl.

"Cool, anyway," said Humphrey. "How did the first day go?"

"All right. It was a little confusing."

"It will always be that way. When are you going to start letting your boss take you to dinner?"

"When I know the boss better," Robbie said.

Robbie unlocked the door, stooped to pick up the mail that had been thrust under it. Humphrey was first. Their faces were close. Her eyes were a deep blue, almost violet, and they weren't happy eyes. He wanted, he realized suddenly, to kiss her. She blushed, straightened and went to the closet in the corner, and put her hat and bag away. Humphrey dropped the mail on her desk and flipped through it. A pale blue envelope with Miss Otis' name in the upper left-hand corner caught his eye. He tore it open.

There were two tickets in the envelope, a check for two hundred dollars, and a brief note.

"Thanks," the note read. "*I saw him. Nothing will be said. The tickets are for Arkelian. He's good, too. Otis.*"

He put the tickets in his pocket, dropped the check on Robbie's typewriter. She was straightening the desk. She tore the Monday page from the calendar and dropped it in the wastebasket. He liked the way she moved. For that matter, he liked everything about her. He sighed and went through the door marked *Private*. Sometimes marriage seemed an attractive institution. He looked back to smile at Robbie, saw that she wasn't alone. There was a man standing at her desk, a giant of a man in a flannel shirt and khaki riding-breeches and high laced boots. The man's right arm hung down at his side, and there was a black glove covering the hand. Robbie was smiling up at him, and her face was lovelier than ever. She saw Humphrey looking at her and stopped smiling. The man turned.

"Did you want to see me?" Humphrey asked the question because of that look on Robbie's face.

"If you're Campbell, I do," the man said, and followed him into the inner office.

Six feet four, Humphrey decided, watching the big man cross the office in a couple of strides. At least that. Six feet four, and no fat on him. Pale hair and blue eyes

and a happy look. He dropped his glance to the black-gloved hand and pulled his eyebrows together.

"My name's Borsden," the big man said.

"Sit down," Humphrey said. He glanced at the glove again. Borsden sat. The chair could have been bigger. He sat very straight, and put his black-gloved hand in his lap. He said: "Your secretary tells me you're good. I hope so."

"You know her?"

"I've met her," Borsden said. "That's where I got your name."

Humphrey thought of the look on Robbie's face, and decided it must have been quite a meeting. After this, he should take his secretary into his confidence when he was looking for someone. It would have saved the interview with Mrs. Peck; but then, the Peck meeting had had its moments. He remembered the voices he had heard through the door, and was pretty sure the man with Mrs. Peck had been Joe Borsden. "What's the trouble?" he asked.

"I'll begin at the beginning." He took a sack of tobacco from the breast pocket of his shirt and rolled a cigarette with his left hand. "Did you ever try to dissociate yourself from the past?" Borsden asked. He didn't wait for an answer. "It can't be done; that's the hell of it."

"Yes," said Humphrey. He tried to look like a sage. He wondered if the visit had anything to do with Miss Otis.

"I thought I had," Borsden continued. "I was wrong."

Humphrey wanted to ask him to get to the point. He picked up a pencil and tried to sketch Robbie on the clean green blotter. "I used to play the piano," Borsden went on. He was stating an unimportant fact; he might just as well have said he used to be a plumber. "I had a wife and a home and a boy." He looked up. "Or perhaps you know all this?"

"Some of it," Humphrey said. "Miss Otis told me a bit of it. You see, I found you for Miss Otis."

"I know." Borsden wasn't annoyed. If he minded being found, he didn't show it. "How much did she tell?"

"That you walked out in the middle of a tour, and that your wife divorced you."

"She told you who my wife was?"

"Yes. And I met your mother-in-law. She told me where you could be found."

"You must be good," was Borsden's comment.

Humphrey wondered what you had to do to look properly modest. He reduced Robbie's hips with the point of his pencil.

"I walked out because of the divorce," Borsden said. "I was under the impression that I loved my wife."

HUMPHREY wished Borsden would come to the point. Guys didn't drop into a detective's office just to talk about their family troubles. His thoughts must have pushed themselves across the room, for Borsden said: "Bear with me. I want you to have the background."

"I'm bearing," Humphrey said.

"I came back here to save my home," Borsden said mildly. "It couldn't be saved. Now I know it wasn't worth saving, but I didn't then. As I said, I was under the impression I loved my wife, and that she had loved me. I discovered she wasn't capable of loving anything, and that I had been—well, not worshipping exactly—admiring rather—a product of my imagination."

"One does that sometimes," Humphrey agreed.

"We were divorced," Borsden went on. "That's important. Or rather the agreement we made is important. I let Irene—my wife—get the divorce quietly. I gave her one hundred thousand dollars and took the boy, Rolfe."

The man was generous, at least. Humphrey wondered if there was anything left over.

"At the time," he continued, "I was wrought up—had to find some reason for being. That's when I moved out

to the barge on the river. Rolfe went to live with my mother—with my mother, and my aunt. A month ago my aunt died, and left Rolfe half a million dollars."

That, thought Humphrey, was a tidy sum. He made Robbie's feet a bit smaller and tried not to look greedy.

"Irene doesn't give a damn about Rolfe," Borsden continued. "At least, she didn't—until he was worth half a million. Now she wants him. Last week she decided to go to court about it."

So, thought Humphrey. A bit of sleuthing to be done. The thought didn't appeal to him. He liked all women too well to sneak around uncovering their misdeeds. Borsden must have seen distaste in the other's glance, for he shook his head.

"No," he said. "That isn't why I'm here. Only part of the background, Campbell. I can take care of that fight by myself."

Humphrey's pencil increased Robbie's bust measurement. He waited.

BORSDEN rolled another cigarette, and his one-handed dexterity made Humphrey a little envious. "Yesterday," he said, "I had it out with Mrs. Peck."

"I heard you," Humphrey said. "At least, I think I did. It was in Mrs. Peck's outer office. Yesterday just before noon."

Borsden nodded. "Were we that loud?"

"Yes."

"Not so good," said Borsden.

Humphrey put the pencil down. The woman on the blotter still didn't do Robbie justice, but she could wait.

"This morning," Borsden said quietly, "I was working with the dredge, and a boat came down the river upside down." He paused and examined what was left of his cigarette. "I put the boathook on it and pulled it alongside. Then I turned it over." He took a deep breath, and gave Humphrey a curious smile. "There was a body in it."

Humphrey whistled through his teeth.

"My mother-in-law's body." Borsden's voice was mild. "It was stuffed under the seats. Naked. Someone had chopped her up a bit. With an ax, I think."

"You don't need a detective," Humphrey said. "What you need is an attorney."

Borsden smiled. "That may come later."

"There's no may about it," Humphrey said. "I wasn't the only one in Mrs. Peck's outer office yesterday. The secretary was there. So was the mayor and the guy who wants his job. You did some talking about splitting heads."

"That's why I'm not in the police station right now." There was no emotion in his voice, certainly no regret.

"I know the answer," Humphrey said. "But I've got to ask you: Did you do it?"

"No. I gave up that idea long since. I want you to find out who did."

"I imagine you do." He got up, went over to the big chair in the corner where his hat lay, picked it up. "Come on."

"Where?"

"To have a look at the body."

"We can't," Borsden said. "I sent it on down the river."

"Good Lord!" Humphrey said, and flipped his hat at the chair.

"I thought we might need time," said Borsden.

"We need that," said Humphrey. "And we need more than that."

"They'll find the body," Borsden went on. "I don't think they'll identify it right away."

Humphrey tried not to shudder. "How did you?"

"The boat. Her hair. A scar on her arm."

"You might be wrong."

Borsden shook his head. "No. I'm not wrong. It was Mrs. Peck. Her hunting-lodge is about a mile up the river from my barge. That, apparently, is where she was done to death."

"You're holding out on me," Humphrey said. "You could go to the cops and tell them the same story you told me. I don't like cops, but I give them credit for some intelligence."

"I give them credit for plenty."

"When did you see Mrs. Peck last?"

"Yesterday. When you heard me."

"You weren't at her place last night?"

"No."

"Then just because you had a brawl with her over the kid and pulled the boat out of the river, you think the cops will blame you?"

"Something like that."

"I said you were holding out on me. Come on. Give. I'm not psychic."

"You heard me threaten her."

"So did three others."

"That wasn't the first time."

"You must have been fond of her."

"I loathe her. . . . No—put that in the past tense."

"Why would you kill her? Because she and your wife wanted the boy?"

"One," said Borsden.

"Two?"

"She broke up my marriage. Or helped. It wasn't hard to do. Irene is an odd one. She mistook an admiration for music for an affection for me. When Mrs. Peck showed her what seemed to be proof that I was a faithless wretch, it was all over. She divorced me."

"What sort of proof?"

"A picture." Borsden smiled to himself. "Of me and a woman. The woman was Mary Otis. I was holding her in my arms."

"You said *seemed*," Humphrey commented.

"Right. There was nothing to it. But I couldn't convince Irene. She didn't want to be convinced."

"So that ended it."

"Then and there," said Borsden. "Irene saw the picture, and read the reports of Mrs. Peck's detectives, and believed. I don't blame her too much."

"A man might kill his mother-in-law for that," said Humphrey. "But he wouldn't wait. I still think you'll be safe in going to the cops."

Borsden shook his head, smiled wryly. "Not safe at all." He held up his right hand. "See this? Mrs. Peck cut it off."

CHAPTER SIX



UMPHREY'S stomach tied itself in knots. He stared at the black glove, and the knowledge that there was no hand under it affected him far more than the news that Mrs. Peck had been murdered.

"Last May," Borsden said, and his tone was gentle. "A violent woman, Mrs. Peck—particularly with a few Martinis inside. It happened at the lodge." He was silent, looking back into the past. "Right after Irene walked out," he added. "She was up there with her mother, and I followed her. There was an awful row—all of us drinking and calling names. It was cold, and we'd let the fire go out. I went out back and split some kindling, then sat down with my back against the woodshed, smoking and trying to calm down. Mrs. Peck came out and told me to get the hell off the place. I called her a meddling old so-and-so. She resented it."

Humphrey's eyes sought the black glove. *Resented* was one way to put it.

"She picked up the hatchet and threw it at me," Borsden said. "I ducked and put up my hand, and the hatchet pinned it to the wall. A beautiful shot, really. They couldn't save the hand." He smiled. "So I'm a gold-miner."

Humphrey moved to the window and looked out. To the east the hills rose; there was snow far down on the

slopes, and there were a few clouds huddled together above the peaks. A truck with a loud-speaker on it moved slowly along the street three stories down, and brassy music came from the loud-speaker. He said: "We haven't much time."

"Not much."

"They'll find the body," Humphrey said. "They'll identify it in short order. Any idea who killed her, Mr. Borsden?"

"No," Borsden said. "All I know is, I didn't. Last year I might have—but now what happened doesn't matter." Humphrey swung around. "When were you at the lodge last?"

"Sunday afternoon."

"Anyone see you there?"

"Irene was there. And a fellow named Skeel."

"Who's he?"

"I don't know. He was there when I got there."

"Why did you go?"

"A process-server. They filed some sort of an action over the boy's custody. It was filed Saturday morning. They served me Sunday. I went right out."

"What happened?"

"There were a few words flung around. I went back to the barge."

"And yesterday?"

"I delivered an ultimatum," Borsden said. "I told Gertrude that if they hauled me into court, I'd wave my glove at them."

"Did that scare her?"

"Some. But she had anticipated it. She said I couldn't prove it."

"Can you?"

"Only through Irene. She saw it happen. As soon as they find her mother, she'll tell the police."

"And away we go," said Humphrey. "How much of this did you tell Mary Otis?"

"None of it."

"But she saw your hand?"

He nodded. "I said I cut it and got an infection, and they whacked it off."

"Could she have guessed?"

He shrugged. "Suppose she did?" He put his hand in his hip pocket and took out a wallet. "Are you handling this?"

"Yes."

"Thanks." He opened the wallet and removed some bills. "Here's a thousand—to start with. Find out who murdered Mrs. Peck, and there's four thousand more."

"You're going to need an attorney," Humphrey said. "As soon as they find the body, they'll pick you up."

"I know. You can arrange that."

"Don't talk. Don't say a word. If they ask you why you came up here, say it was about the boy. Anyone around when you pulled the boat out?"

"I don't think so."

"There may have been?"

"You can't see my barge from the bridge or the east bank. There was no one on the west bank."

"How do I get to the lodge?"

"You drive through Pollasky. One road turns left over the bridge. Don't take that. Go straight for a mile and a half. On the left you'll see a gate. It will be locked, probably. You go through the gate and along a dirt road for half or three-quarters of a mile."

"Is that where Irene lives?"

"No—no one lives there. Mrs. Peck used it for week-ends and for hiding-out."

"All right. You go back to the barge and stay there." He opened the door. Robbie was trying to look busy.

"I'll do that," Borsden said and moved into the outer office. "Good-by, sprite." He wasn't speaking to Humphrey. The outer door closed on his big form.

"Sprite," Humphrey repeated, and wiggled his nose at Robbie. The girl blushed. He was going to ask what

Borsden meant, but the blush made him change his mind. He said: "You can open your first file. You can label it 'The Borsden case.'"

"Yes," said Robbie.

"The second Borsden case," said Humphrey. "And I hope they don't write jingles about this one. I hope they don't say Joseph Borsden took an ax, gave his mother-in-law forty whacks."

CHAPTER SEVEN



GERTRUDE ELLEN PECK's hunting-lodge stood in a grove of trees on a knoll above the river, and from the front porch you could see the curving stream and the hill sweeping up on the other side. White-faced cattle grazed on the hill, and poppies salted the drying grass with bits of gold.

For a place used only on week-ends and as an occasional hideout, it was quite an establishment: a long, low building covered with split redwood shakes. You could drive a herd of reindeer down the chimney. A fence of split rails snaked at a discreet distance around the house and out-buildings, and honeysuckle draped itself over the rails.

From the shelter of a big cottonwood to the south, Humphrey inspected the lodge and decided he wouldn't mind living in it. He and Robbie and his accordion could be quite happy here. For that matter, he and Robbie and his accordion could be happy anywhere. The trouble was, there was Joe Borsden to think of. A man with no honor would set the cops on Mr. Borsden and get him removed from the scene. Humphrey sighed. He didn't like the expression that had come into Robbie's eyes when Borsden had called her *sprite*. That was something he had never called a woman. Maybe he should try out the word.

He gave his attention to the lodge. It looked unoccupied. No smoke came from the chimneys. The windows he could see were shut, and the back door was shut. But you couldn't be sure until you banged on the door, and that was something he didn't want to do. If he had on overalls, he could say he was the telephone man or the plumber, but he had forgotten to bring overalls. He lit a cigarette, leaned against the tree and considered. Then he was glad he had parked his car out of sight of the gate and eschewed the road—for another man was also casing the joint.

The man came along the gravelled driveway, and from his manner you could tell he hoped there was no one home. He was so far away that all Humphrey could make out was that he had a mustache, a blue suit and a hat with a rakish brim. He seemed of average height and build. He seemed, also, fairly familiar with the layout.

Where the driveway forked to circle the lodge, the man stopped and lit a cigarette. He flipped the match away and casually looked all around him, but Humphrey knew he wasn't casual. He knew just how the man felt, and sympathized with him a little. The fellow tugged at his hat-brim, then strode purposefully ahead, taking the driveway to the left. Humphrey put a screen of trees between him and the house, and moved toward the river. The man went around front, took a few quick looks and apparently some deep breaths, marched up to the door and pushed the bell. Nothing happened. The door stayed shut. The man put his right hand in his coat pocket, and when he brought it out, there were gloves in it. He pulled on the gloves and went to the porch rail, where there was a row of pots with flowers in them. He moved one of the pots, took something from under it—a key, Humphrey was sure. Then he went back to the front door, opened it and disappeared. The door swung softly shut.

A low, unscrupulous fellow, Humphrey meditated. Knew where Mrs. Peck kept the key hidden and took advantage of the knowledge! He owed it to the world to teach the man a lesson. He also owed it to himself to get

a good look at him and find out what he was doing in the lodge. He frowned at the door, tried to think of a reason for banging on it. A place like this should have a watchman. In his coat pocket were four badges. He took them out, selected the star-shaped one that said *Special Deputy*, pinned it on his vest and put the others back. From his breast pocket he took a cigar, shoved it in the corner of his face and chewed on it a minute. Then he put his hat on the back of his head and walked boldly up to the house, hitting the steps solidly with his feet. Covering his thumb with his handkerchief, he pushed the bell, returned the handkerchief to his pocket and waited.

Inside, there was silence. The intruder would be giving the situation a great deal of thought. He would be wondering if someone had spotted him. In a couple of minutes he would sneak to one of the front windows and take a quick peek. Humphrey put his thumbs under his suspenders and let the world see he was a special deputy. He rolled the cigar from one side of his mouth to the other, stood flat-footed in front of the door, and out of the corners of his eyes watched the window to the left. Presently the curtain moved a little. Humphrey hit the door with his knuckles. There was more quiet. Then footsteps came up to the door, and it swung open. The man wasn't wearing gloves, or a hat.

"Mrs. Peck home?" said Humphrey, pushing the words past the cigar.

"I'm the only one here," the man snapped. "What do you want?"

"Checking up," said Humphrey. "Thought I saw someone sneaking around here."

"You saw me," the man said. "Mrs. Peck sent me out for some papers."

Humphrey cleared his throat, angled the cigar skyward. "Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah," the man said. He was slight, but he looked tough. His eyes were very black and very cold; and if that was a natural curl in his black hair, it was a beauty.

"Name?"

"So you don't believe me?"

"Sure I believe you," Humphrey said, and let the cigar down. He put respect in his tone. "I'm paid to keep an eye on this joint."

"I'm here," the man said. "So scram."

"Now look, Mister—"

"I've got things to do."

"You work for Mrs. Peck?"

"What the hell do you think?"

"On the News, you work?"

"I told you Mrs. Peck sent me out here for some papers."

"Keep your shirt on, Mister. I'm just doing my job." Humphrey was plaintive.

"Oh, Gawd!" The man sounded disgusted. "Sixteen burglars could break in, and you wouldn't see them. I belong, see." He took a key out of his pocket. "Know where Mrs. Peck keeps it?"

"Under the flower-pot," said Humphrey.

"Take a look, stupe. You won't find a key there. Because I took it, see. How would I know where the key was, stupe?"

"Don't call me stupe," Humphrey said.

"I got work to do."

"Okay," Humphrey said. "Okay, okay. But I'm doing my duty. You could tell me your name. You could show me maybe a card to prove who you was."

"All right," the man said. "My name's Harris." He tried to sound like a patient man whose patience was wearing thin. Humphrey marveled at the other's self-control. His stomach must be tied in knots, but he didn't show it. "I'm a"—there was only a slight hesitation—"reporter. You can call the office if you wish." The last sentence dared him to do it.

"I guess it's all right."

"Thanks. I'll tell Mrs. Peck you were right on the job."

"Okay." Humphrey turned and went down the stairs. He heard the door close. He went around the house and along the road until he was out of sight of the place; then he cut back through the woods and took up his station behind the big cottonwood. Five minutes later the man who called himself Harris hurried around the corner, stopped to survey the countryside, then hurried north and disappeared.

The intruder had put the key again in its hiding-place. Humphrey's gloved hand fitted it into the lock; the door opened, and he found himself in a hall that ended in a glass-enclosed patio. There were two doors on the right. On the left a doorless opening led into the long redwood-paneled living-room. A huge fireplace took up most of the far end.

He stood on the threshold a moment examining the room; and admiration for the late Mrs. Peck's flair for interior decoration filled him. She had believed in comfort. A great davenport faced the hearth, and there were half a dozen huge armchairs scattered around. Facing the big front windows, which looked toward the river, was another davenport. The rust-colored rug looked expensive. There was a bright picture above the mantel. It showed a ratty-looking guy walking along with some junk under his arm; apparently the guy was a painter.

The place needed airing. The smell of stale wood- and cigarette-smoke lay heavily around him as he crossed to the fireplace and stood staring down at the low table in front of the davenport. There were two glasses and a half-filled whisky bottle on the table. A metal ice-container partly filled with water, and a siphon, stood near the bottle. There was lipstick on the rims of the glasses beside the bottle, and there was lipstick on the ends of the cigarette-butts almost filling the big ash-tray in the center of the table. Apparently several smokers had used the tray, for a motley collection of brands were represented. Some of his respect for Mrs. Peck departed. One would think that with a fireplace close at hand, a dame could empty the ash-tray now and then. Unless, of course, she was cockeyed. With his forefinger he poked at the stubs, saw the disreputable remains of several well-known brands of cigarettes. He took one of each and put them in his pocket. Oscar's Bavarian Institute would give him a gold star for that, he thought, though he didn't know what he would do with them. He stared at the junk on the table and decided it would help if he took a course in fingerprinting. There should be some fine fingerprints on the glasses.

AT the left of the hearth was a big chest of carved dark wood, half-filled with logs and kindling; he knelt on the hearth, took off a glove and put his bare hand over the heap of ashes. They were faintly warm. He replaced the glove, stood up, went to the windows and thoughtfully stared down at the cottonwoods and willows partly screening the river that had carried Mrs. Peck on her last journey.

The thought of the boat with Mrs. Peck's mutilated body in it put a hollowness in the pit of his stomach. He turned from the windows and crossed to the door in the wall between the bookcases. It opened into a compact kitchen, with crisp dotted curtains looped beside the wide window back of the chromium-plated sink. As he gazed around him at the white enamel and tile and shining chromium of the little room, he realized there was something wrong. Then he knew what it was. The stove didn't fit. It was a big old-fashioned wood-burning stove, and beside it was another carved wood-box. The box was empty.

That wasn't right, really. Electric lights, and a wood stove! Then his taut nerves jumped as off somewhere a motor started throbbing and he was at the window in two strides, staring at the yard. There was a shed over to the left, and it seemed to him the sound of the motor came from the shed. He filled his lungs with air and grinned. An automatic electric system! That was it, of course. That

was the reason for the wood stove. He studied it. Two lids had been removed, and the fire-box was stuffed with newspaper. A coffee-pot stood at the back. He lifted the lid of the pot. Coffee and water had been put in, but the mixture hadn't been boiled. He frowned, gave his attention to the icebox in the corner. It was, he discovered, of a kerosene-burning type.

He moved from it to the sink.

On the drainboard was a plate with three slices of bread on it. Removing his gloves, he poked the bread, discovered it was quite fresh. A clean cup and saucer stood near it, and beside that there were three oranges cut in half and a glass device for removing the juice. The oranges had not been squeezed. Two eggs lay back of the oranges, two very virginal white eggs. Apparently, Mrs. Peck had been interrupted while getting breakfast ready.

CAREFULLY he inspected the spotless linoleum. No one had been cut up in the kitchen, he decided. He stood there staring around him for a while, then pulled on his gloves and went through the living-room into the hall. The two doors, he discovered, gave access to the bedrooms. He entered the back bedroom first, saw with approval that it had a double bed in it. No one, it seemed, had slept in the maple spool bed. The spread covering it was so smooth it might just have been ironed. He poked around the room, looked into a closet that had a couple of extra pillows and blankets in it, went through another door and found himself in a bathroom smelling faintly of scent. A blue bath-mat lay in front of the glass-doored shower. Again he removed his gloves, bent and put his hand on the mat. It was damp. Two blue towels were hung over the glass rods on the wall, and one of them was damp. The tile floor, he saw, had no blood spots on it, and there were no blood-stains on the wash-bowl.

Through the open door opposite he looked into what apparently was Mrs. Peck's bedroom. Anyway, it seemed to fit her. It was decorated in blue. The bed, a low, unusually broad affair, was unmade. The covers were thrown back, and the blue bedspread, neatly folded, reposed on a chair near the foot. On the table beside the bed were an open book on its face, a half-empty water-glass and an ash-tray with two cigarette-butts in it. A blue chiffon nightgown was flung carelessly on the armchair near the window. Otherwise the room was in perfect order. There were no clothes strewn around. There was nothing to indicate that its occupant had been done to death in such awful fashion.

Humphrey slid the gloves back on and opened the closet door. Dresses, suits and coats hung neatly from the hangers. Several pairs of shoes were on the rack against the wall. On the upper shelf were three hat-boxes. The ash-tray in the living-room told one story, he thought—this room another. This room revealed that Mrs. Peck was extraordinarily neat and orderly. Either that, or she had thrown into the clothes hamper the underclothes she had worn yesterday. He went back into the bathroom and opened the hamper. It was empty. Again he looked into the closet, poked about among the clothes, sighed. He was giving the matter a good deal of thought, when the sound of the doorbell ripped through the silent house. Automatically he moved to the door into the hall, opened it and started toward the front door, so preoccupied with a puzzle confronting him that he forgot for the moment that he was not the tenant, but a guy who had no business inside Mrs. Peck's lodge. Again the doorbell rang, and this time the sound brought with it the realization that he should be getting the hell out of the joint.

A woman's voice called: "Mother!" There was silence; then a key rattled in the lock. Before the door opened, Humphrey was across the hall and into the living-room. Again the voice said petulantly, "Mother?" Now Humphrey was stretched out in front of the davenport facing the windows. It wasn't a good place to hide, but it was the best he could find in a hurry.

Footsteps went along the hall, faded out. Presently he heard them again, and then the carpet muffled them. He peered under the davenport and saw trim ankles and small feet. They moved to the hearth, stopped. Their owner was standing on tiptoe. Something scraped the wall. There were a few faint clicks, then a rustling of paper. Heels touched the hearth. The rustle of paper continued. Up went the heels again; something slammed; something scraped the wall. Down came the heels. Their owner dropped on her knees; a match flared, and he saw two outstretched hands. One had a stiff document in it that seemed to be a photostat. But the flame didn't touch the paper. The hand flipped the match to the ashes, and the woman stood up. Humphrey considered jumping out and leaping on the woman. Maybe he could do it without being seen; and he wanted that paper very much. But he thought better of it—one never knew how things like that were going to turn out; he might trip; the woman might be an amazon. From her ankles, she didn't look it, but you never could tell.

The feet turned. They moved across the room and into the hall. The door banged shut. He was up now and peering through the window. On the porch was a slim young woman in a blue dress and a blue turban. All he could see of her was her back, but it was a good back, a fine straight back. That, he decided, must be Irene. He took a deep breath and watched her go down the stairs and around the house, and then he caught a fleeting glimpse of her profile. Irene was a good-looking wench.

HE waited, listening intently. Faintly he heard the hum of a motor; then in a moment it died away. He swung around and looked at the fireplace. The picture above the mantel was slightly askew, and he knew why. Behind it was Mrs. Peck's wall safe. In that safe until Irene had appeared had been a photostatic copy of some paper—important enough to Irene to make her consider touching a match to it. Why had she changed her mind? He thought again of the man who had preceded him into the lodge, and it occurred to him that maybe the man and Irene were interested in the same thing. Well, Irene had it. He hoped she wouldn't decide to destroy it. And with that hope he went outside and down the twisting path to the boathouse.

The rough frame structure stood on a platform at the edge of the deep channel. The river was high, and the water slid almost silently under the wharf. Humphrey shivered.

The door was unlocked. He pushed it open and saw through the opening at the far end the sun-bathed river and the hill beyond. The place smelled of mold, creosote and gasoline. Under him water whispered around the pilings. Beyond the boathouse the divided wharf ran out into the channel.

He looked around him. The place was clean, orderly. There was no dust on the floor. He squatted and frowned at the boards. They were damp, and here and there worn places still held tiny pools of water. Near the door a hose was coiled on its spool, and he knew what had happened. Mrs. Peck's murderer wasn't taking chances of leaving footprints behind.

A trim red craft, its motor covered by a tarpaulin, was moored to his right. On his left there was space enough for another boat. In the rack on the wall were two pairs of oars, secured with a chain and padlock. Over in the corner was a shovel. He walked over and inspected the blade. Mud and sand clung to the steel.

He moved slowly out over the water into the bright sunlight, his eyes searching the boards, to the far end of the wharf. Here the water was deep and swift. His gaze followed the channel south and west, where it swerved around a low bluff. Below him, a mile or so, was the bridge, but he couldn't see it. Nor could he see the little town of Pollasky sprawled on the low hills. Around that bend, somewhere, was a barge, and on the barge was his client,

Joe Borsden. Not very long ago a boat had floated down to the barge. How long did it take to get there? There was no knowing. The tide might have carried it swiftly down, or it might have swept the craft in toward the bank, and the tangle of trees and vines might have held it for hours.

He turned and went back to the comparative gloom of the boathouse. Again he examined the place. No ax here, no bloodstains. And no amount of water would have washed Mrs. Peck's blood from these rough boards, had she been hacked to death under this roof.

As he climbed the path up the gentle slope, his gaze was on the flagstones, but they told him nothing. It seemed to him that someone had swept them clean very recently. That, he thought, would be the smart thing to do. A tidy person, Mrs. Peck's killer.

He realized he didn't know yet where Mrs. Peck was done to death. He realized, too, that the murder seemed as yet unreal. But when he went around the lodge and pushed open the door of the shed in the service yard, he came face to face with the horrible reality. The little building, which served as woodshed, tool- and powerhouse, reeked of death. There was blood splattered on the walls, and there was blood on the shining motor of the now silent electrical system; and there was blood on the pile of wood against the wall. The cement floor had been hosed off; but the stone remembered, darkly, that a woman's life had drained away here in this little room.

His eyes sought and found the weapon. It was leaning against the wall, near the door—a double-bitted ax; and there was blood on the wicked, narrow head and on the handle. Above it, suspended by its head from two nails, was a hatchet. Joe Borsden's black-gloved right hand came into Humphrey's consciousness, and he found himself wondering whether that was the hatchet that had ruined Borsden's career. Again his mind played with his version of the famous rhyme—*Joseph Borsden took an ax, gave his mother-in-law forty whacks*. He wished he were out of all this. The thought of someone laying Mrs. Peck low with that ax wasn't a sweet one to toy with.

Well, he was in it, and he wasn't going to back out. Joe Borsden had hired him to discover Mrs. Peck's murderer, and that's what he was going to do. Who and why? He pulled his eyebrows down, and in his mind he went through the lodge again, through the living-room and the kitchen and the bathroom and the bedrooms. Obvious what had happened: She had risen, bathed, gone to the kitchen to get breakfast. The wood-box was empty, so she had gone to the shed, and there she had been set upon. It didn't take a master-mind to figure that out.

He rubbed his left eyebrow, stared thoughtfully at the ax. . . . In a little while, someone would spot a boat floating upside down on the icy waters of the river. In a little while a swarm of cops would descend. He didn't want to be around when that happened. He closed the door and hurried off through the woods.

CHAPTER EIGHT

 THE man behind the desk in the ornate lobby of the hotel looked bored, and leaked condescension. When Humphrey walked up to the desk, he was cleaning his nails and chatting with the girl at the switchboard. He let Humphrey stand there.

"Don't get excited," Humphrey said. "I don't want a room."

The clerk's puffy vacant face stayed vacant.

"When you get around to it, see if Miss Otis is in," Humphrey said. He put hotel clerks back on the list of people he didn't like. He couldn't decide whether hotel clerks or cops would head the list.

"The room phone's over there." The clerk waved his nail-file toward the back. . . .

Miss Otis was in. She told him to come on up. She said brusquely that she was a very busy woman, but could spare him a minute or two.

If Mary Otis was worried over anything but the appearance of Mr. Arkelian and his fiddle in Joaquin, she didn't show it. Her room looked like an office. An open portable typewriter stood on the desk by the windows. There were piles of paper on the floor and bed and dresser. She looked surprisingly feminine. A rose-colored negligee covered her lean body, and her hair fell loosely on her shoulders. She was smoking a cigarette in a long ivory holder and the room reeked of it.

She smiled pleasantly when she opened the door, stood aside. "Come in."

"Thanks for the tickets," Humphrey said.

"That why you came? To thank me?"

"No," Humphrey said. He closed the door. He moved to the windows, which looked down at the courthouse park, and stood with his back to them. If Miss Otis had used the ax on the publisher of the *News*, she must be a cool article. He gazed around him at the untidy room. Her green eyes stared probingly at him. "No," he repeated.

"Well?"

"In a little while there'll be cops here asking questions," Humphrey said.

She pushed her dark hair back. Her hands were white and strong. "What?"

"The law," Humphrey said. "You're in a jam."

"Rot," Mary Otis snapped.

"When did you see Mrs. Peck last?"

"That is none of your affair."

"It isn't," Humphrey said. "It's your affair. When the cops ask you the same question, you better have an answer."

"What are you driving at?" Her thin, strongly chiseled face wore a small frown.

"Somebody seems to have murdered Mrs. Peck," Humphrey said mildly. He didn't feel mild. He still wished he had never heard of Joe Borsden or Mary Otis or Mrs. Peck.

"Oh, my God!" Miss Otis said. She put her hand up to her mouth. "Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes," said Humphrey.

"When?"

"Last night or this morning."

THE young woman moved to a chair, sat in it. There was horror in her eyes. Her skin seemed to take on a yellowish tinge. "I was—" she said faintly.

"You were what?"

"Out there last night. But I didn't do it." Her voice was plaintive. Her eyes begged him to believe. "I didn't kill her. I had no reason to."

Humphrey shrugged, leaned against the sill.

"I was only there a little while."

"All right."

"How?" She swallowed. "How—where?"

"With an ax," said Humphrey. "A double-bitted ax."

"They—they've—of course they have, because you know."

"No, they haven't," Humphrey said. "But they will."

"But you—"

"Joe Borsden found her."

The name seemed to paralyze her. Her lips parted, and her arms hung limply down.

"Someone put her in a boat," Humphrey said. "The boat came floating down the river, and Borsden saw it."

She didn't speak. She stared at him; then her body found strength, and she sat up straight and her face grew stern.

"He let it float away," Humphrey said. "He's in one hell of a jam. That's why I'm here."

Her lips formed a word, but she didn't say it. She took a deep breath instead.

"You're Borsden's friend," Humphrey said. "I'm telling you something I won't tell the police: About Borsden's finding the body. They'll find it, and they'll try to pin the murder on him. It's my job to stop them."

"Did he?" The question was almost inaudible.

"I hope not," Humphrey said. "If he did, I'm going to lose my faith in mankind."

"Stop it!" Miss Otis said. "Don't be so damned flip." Suddenly her assurance came back. "Tell me exactly what happened."

"That's it. Borsden came to me awhile ago and said he had found Mrs. Peck's body. He put me on the payroll. He wants to know who did it. So let's have your story."

"What have I got to do with it?"

"You said you were out there last night."

"Suppose I was?"

"Do you want to help Borsden?"

"I'll do what I can."

"All right. Tell me about yesterday. Why did you go out there?"

"What difference does it make why I was out there?"

"My dear," Humphrey said patiently, "yesterday I approached Mrs. Peck at your request to locate Borsden. She told me where he could be found. I told you. You saw him. Last night you saw her. Then someone hit her with an ax. Doesn't it seem a bit odd?"

SHE got up, mashed her cigarette on the glass covering the dresser top. He hoped she wouldn't light another, but she disappointed him. She spoke crisply: "I went out there around six o'clock. Why isn't important. I stayed twenty minutes or so. Then I came back to the hotel. I've been here ever since."

"Anyone see you there?"

"Yes. Joe's—her daughter and some man. I left right after they came."

"You don't know who the man was?"

"No. I wasn't introduced."

"Come on. Why did you go out?"

"You're not a policeman," she snapped.

"Thank God!" Humphrey was fervent. "I'm on the other side, Miss Otis. Borsden's not the only one who's going to get mixed up in this. You are, and there's nothing you can do about it. So you better find an answer to that question. . . . I think I know it anyway."

"Yes?"

"How did Joe Borsden lose his hand, Miss Otis?"

She shot a glance at him. "He said he cut it. Got an infection."

"But you didn't believe him."

"Of course I believed him."

"Don't lie."

She moved toward him, and he wondered if she was going to lay one on his jaw. She looked capable enough. Their eyes met. "That's why you went there," Humphrey said softly. "You wanted to ask Mrs. Peck how Joe Borsden lost his hand."

She had stopped a few feet away. Her gaze didn't waver. She said: "Don't be a fool! What does it matter to me how he lost his hand? It's gone. And with it a tremendous talent." Her lids drew together; a frown creased her broad forehead. "What are you getting at, anyway?"

Humphrey smiled crookedly. "You came back to the hotel and stayed here?"

"Right."

"Any proof, Miss Otis? The cops will ask you that."

"Proof? What sort of proof?"

"Anyone see you? Did you make any calls?"

She stood over the desk, and her fingers played with the typewriter keys. "I had dinner and came upstairs." The carriage slid across with a bang, and the bell rang, but the sudden sound didn't seem to startle her. "Let's see. I left a call at the desk. Yes. I know I did that,

because they called me this morning. And I had them send up some ice."

"What time was that?"

"I don't remember. It was late. I came back here after dinner and worked. Then I sent for some ice and had a drink. I put in a call and went to bed. They'll know downstairs."

"This morning you haven't been out?"

"No. I've been here working. I had breakfast here."

"When?"

"After six. I was called at six."

"Isn't that rather early?"

"For me it isn't. I work."

"You won't tell me why you went to see Mrs. Peck?"

"It isn't important."

"Did she say anything significant?"

She laughed without humor. "She never said anything significant in her life."

"Did you have a drink with her?"

"Yes. We talked, and I smoked a couple of cigarettes; then I left."

Humphrey straightened, turned. He stared down at the park, where some men in blue denim were mowing the lawn. Behind the courthouse he saw the bulk of the county jail, and it didn't look like a pleasant place to stay. "That's that," he said, and picked up his hat. "But when the cops come, be a little more tactful."

"Why should I?"

"You've got me there," Humphrey said. "Anyway, think up a good reason for being at the lodge."

Her smile was ironic. "Good-by, Mr. Campbell. I hope you like Arkelian."

"I hope so too," said Humphrey, and departed.

He didn't go the lobby to question the clerk. At the moment, the clerk was more than he could stomach. Instead he took the elevator to the basement where the garage was, and gave the young Negro attendant a fleeting look at one of his badges. The Negro wasn't impressed. You could tell he didn't think much of the cops, either.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Which is Miss Otis' car?"

"That one." The attendant flicked his thumb at a coupé parked behind two others.

"Were you here last night?"

"Sure. That's my job."

"What time did it come in?"

"Seven—seven-thirty."

"Did it go out again?"

"No."

"Thanks."

The youth shrugged, turned away. Humphrey considered giving him a dollar, changed his mind: the information the young man had given him wasn't worth a dollar. He went up the ramp to the street, found a drug-store and shut himself in a phone booth. Mrs. Peck's secretary said Mrs. Peck wasn't in. He said he didn't know when she would be in. Was she home? He didn't know that. Humphrey thanked him, went out and climbed into a cab.

CHAPTER NINE



GERTRUDE ELLEN PECK's residence was in a new subdivision north of town. It stood in a clump of cottonwoods and sycamores on a rise near the canal, a sprawling adobe structure that looked like fifty thousand bucks. If that's what the newspaper business got you, it was a good racket, he thought. He pushed the bell. The elderly Negro woman who answered the door led him down a cool dark hall to an immense living-room.

He was looking into the patio when a cool voice said: "Mr. Campbell?" He turned. Across the room was the

young woman he had seen not an hour before on the porch of the lodge. She had more than a good back and a fine profile. She had a figure and honey-colored hair, but her blue eyes were too pale and her lips too thin. Behind her was a young man—an apple-cheeked fellow with wavy dark hair. The wholesome type, the fresh, breezy type, thought Humphrey, though at the moment he looked sullen and angry. Humphrey guessed the man had just been told off, and told off plenty.

"I'm Campbell," Humphrey said.

"The maid said it was something about my son?"

Humphrey nodded. She came toward him, stopped at an armchair, put herself in it. The man stayed back by the door. Irene had a piece of chiffon in her hands, and she started tying knots in it. "Sit down, Mr. Campbell."

There was a chair facing her. He sat in it. "Mr. Borsden has employed an attorney," he said.

"Naturally."

"I'm from the attorney's office, Mrs. Borsden."

"Miss Peck," Irene said coldly.

"Sorry, Miss Peck. We wondered if you had changed your mind in this matter."

"Why should I?" Her voice was as frosty as her glance.

"You still want to go to court—after last night?"

Her body stiffened. "What do you mean?" Apple-cheeks took a couple of steps forward, looked menacing.

"We have in our office a report from certain operatives. Humphrey fondled his hat brim. "It has to do with your—ah—whereabouts last night. You know—fitness as a mother."

He wished his chair were a bit farther away; he didn't like the looks of her fingernails. Apple-cheeks took two or three more steps, and Humphrey didn't like the looks of him either.

"What do you mean?"

"Our operatives may have been mistaken, of course. But they report that you and a young gentleman registered as Mr. and Mrs. Patton at the Joaquin Hotel north of the city, at eight last night."

"They lie." She was standing now and her eyes blazed.

"Damn you!" Apple-cheeks said, and came toward Humphrey.

"Don!" Her voice was even colder. ("Don," thought Humphrey; "this guy must be Skeel.") "I can handle this."

"But Irene!"

"I can handle this," she said. "They lie," she snapped.

"I can prove they lie."

"I said they may have been mistaken. That's why I'm here, Miss Peck."

"Get out."

Humphrey rose. He said quietly: "Custody cases are at best messy affairs, Miss Peck. One's past rises up to bite one now and then."

The taunt had its desired effect. She hurled words at him. "There is nothing in my past that needs hiding. Go into court with this ridiculous charge, and I'll have a dozen witnesses to call you a liar. I was with my mother last night."

"You can prove it?"

"Damn! right she can prove it!" Apple-cheeks shouted.

"I was with her."

Her eyes shot a smoking glance at Apple-cheeks. "Please, Mr. Skeel. I'm perfectly able to handle this person." She transferred her dislike to Humphrey. "Yes, I can prove it. By Mr. Beaumont."

"He saw you?"

"Of course he saw me. At eight I was at my mother's cabin. Ask Mr. Beaumont. He saw me there."

"Mr. Beaumont is your attorney."

"I don't care who he is."

"Listen," Skeel snarled. "I saw her there."

Her eyes sneered at him, her thin lip curled a bit, but she didn't say anything to him.

"I'm sorry," Humphrey said contritely. "Apparently there has been a mistake. Such things do happen, Miss

Peck. You'll note I came to you at once. Accept my apologies, Miss Peck."

She glared at him. She didn't seem willing to accept anything. And as he turned his back and walked toward the door, he felt uneasy. He wouldn't blame her if she picked up an andiron and heaved it after him. He wished again he had chosen another profession.

The noon edition of the *News* was out when he reached the center of town. He stopped in front of a news-stand and read the headlines. They were preoccupied with mass murder in London. Apparently Mrs. Peck was still in the boat and the boat was heading for the sea. That was good; a man could work more efficiently without cops hanging around. . . .

Robbie was sitting very straight in front of her typewriter, and her fingers were hitting the keys. There was a book beside the machine, and she was copying something out of the book.

"Practicing," Robbie said. "Mr. Morgan is in."

"Good-humored?"

"Not very."

"A lovable character," Humphrey said. "Here's a couple of things you can do for me: Call Frank Beaumont and ask if he can see me for a minute; then—"

Robbie interrupted. "Mr. Beaumont came in a little while ago and said he wanted to see you."

"Well, well," said Humphrey. "Call him and say I'll be in in ten or fifteen minutes. Then see if you can find out who Mr. Don Skeel is."

She put a couple of curlies on the desk-pad. Watching her, he wished he had in his youth turned his character over to some character-building agency. He didn't think Robbie would approve of his past.

Oscar barked when he closed the inner door behind him: "Where you been?"

"You should drink milk." Humphrey sat down. "If you were going to kill a dame, would you cut her up with an ax?"

"What?" Oscar swallowed, looked a bit greener.

"We are confronted by such a situation."

"Oh, God," said Oscar. Then he leaned forward. "Any dough in it?"

"Five thousand."

"Ah," said Oscar. "Give."

"Miss Vance has the first installment."

Oscar's finger reached for the button. "Don't be greedy," Humphrey said. "Wouldn't you like to hear more about this?"

Oscar pulled his hand back. He sighed. "I suppose so. Let's have it."

Humphrey gave it to him. It wasn't a pretty story to tell to a man with a hangover. Oscar groaned a couple of times and finally got the bottle out, poured a stiff drink and downed it. That and the news Borsden had money and his son was on the halfway mark toward being a millionaire, carried him through to the end.

"But we'll solve it, my boy," he said. "What do you make of it so far?"

Humphrey shrugged. "Not too much. She was killed, apparently, early this morning. That's the way the cops will read the layout. They'll say she was in the kitchen getting breakfast ready, went out to the woodshed for wood and was knocked off. If what I saw in her bedroom means anything, she had on underclothes, slippers and robe. At first glance it looks as though this custody business might be back of it. It points in Borsden's direction, anyway. But that's a good reason to look for something else."

"The daughter," said Oscar sagely.

"I'd say the daughter doesn't know her mother is dead," said Humphrey.

Oscar directed a glance that was meant to be pitying in Humphrey's direction. "My boy! The daughter was there this morning, wasn't she?"

"Calling Mother," said Humphrey.

"Exactly. She was calling Mother. Doesn't it occur to you that she might have seen you enter that house, might have wanted you to think that she half-expected her mother to be there?"

"I wish you wouldn't think," said Humphrey. "You confuse me. So she knew I was there hiding behind the davenport, went to the safe and took out a paper."

"A herring."

"As red as blood," said Humphrey. "Please, Oscar. No theories yet."

Oscar looked hurt. "You'll see."

"Maybe. Now this confronts us. The district attorney doesn't like us. Lou Anders, the sheriff, isn't too fond of us, either. And this is going to be a county case. But your friend the chief of police can help a bit. Once they get going, you waddle down to the police station and buy the chief a couple of beers. He can find out what goes on. He can, perhaps, gum up the works by horning in. I'll leave that to you. You seem to be buddies."

"For the nonce," said Oscar.

"My job," Humphrey continued, "is to learn the reason for the mob scene at the lodge last night. Beaumont was there, and Otis was there, and Skeel and the daughter were there. The esthetic gentleman I ran into this morning may have been there too. I want to know who he is, and who Skeel is. There's a political campaign on, and I want to know if that has anything to do with Mrs. Peck's boat-ride." The buzzer cut short the dissertation. Robbie's voice said that Mr. Beaumont was ready to see Mr. Campbell.

"Off we go," he said, and let himself into the hall.

CHAPTER TEN



IT down, neighbor," Beaumont said, waving a chubby hand at the leather armchair facing the desk. "Swell day. Too swell for work." He filled his lungs with air. "Like to be out on the course smacking the old pellet. That's the life." His geniality seemed a bit forced. The hand that selected a fat cigar from the humidor on the desk and held it out wasn't too steady.

Humphrey declined the cigar. "How's the campaign?"

"Good. Lot of work, but good."

"I hear you were looking for me," Humphrey said.

"Well—" Beaumont spoke hesitantly. "Not exactly."

"We need business," Humphrey prompted.

Beaumont eyed him through half-closed lids. "No clients yet?"

"Not to speak of. We could use a good one."

The attorney shoved the cigar in his face, lit it, flipped the match over his shoulder. "I might have a little job for you. Just a little one. But if you're busy on something important—"

"Busy? Me?"

"I sort of—well, I got the idea you were doing something for—ah—Mrs. Peck."

"You're her attorney," said Humphrey. "If she hired me, you'd certainly know about it."

"You're mistaken," said Beaumont. "I was her attorney, or rather I was her daughter's attorney in one small matter."

"You're not now?"

Beaumont shook his head vigorously.

"I'm not working for Mrs. Peck," said Humphrey. "If that's worrying you! I'm doing a little job, but I can take on another."

"You're sure what you're doing doesn't concern Mrs. Peck?"

Humphrey's smile was bland. "No," he said emphatically. You couldn't call that a lie, he told himself. Inasmuch as Mrs. Peck had ceased to exist, you couldn't say that what he was doing concerned her. "What makes you think I'm

mixed up with Mrs. Peck? Because you saw me in her office yesterday?"

Beaumont nodded. When Humphrey shot the first question at him, he had seemed frightened. There was relief in his eyes now. There was something else, Humphrey knew. It might have to do with Mrs. Peck's murder. Beaumont could have been hanging around the lodge this morning. And again, it might have something to do with Mr. Borsden's visit. Maybe word of the visit had been passed along by Beaumont's prim secretary, who could see everyone who went into the Morgan-Campbell office.

"Set your mind at rest," said Humphrey. "What can we do for you?"

"I won't know definitely until tomorrow," said Beaumont. "Suppose I drop in in the morning."

Humphrey was very earnest: "Now look, Mr. Beaumont: I shouldn't discuss cases we're working on. You understand that. But I'm going to be honest with you. We've been called in on a child-custody matter—asked to check up on a certain party to see if she's all right. You know what I mean—morals, and all that. I might as well tell you the woman is Mrs. Peck's daughter."

Beaumont made his eyes round. He set up a smoke-screen, and ashes fell on his stomach.

"Joe Borsden hired us," Humphrey added. "So you see it doesn't really concern Mrs. Peck. Oh, indirectly it does, I suppose. But we're not on her side."

Beaumont sighed, and Humphrey thought he had never seen a man who needed rest more. "Let me think it over," Beaumont's tired voice said. "I'll call you later."

Humphrey found a worried expression. "Say! You wouldn't be—Miss Peck isn't thinking of putting this custody case in your hands, is she?"

"Oh, no." He hurried the words out.

"That would be bad," Humphrey said. "Me talking to you like this, if you were going to handle the case." He put an edge on his tone. "Look here. . . . That's right! You were in Mrs. Peck's office yesterday, and last night you were out at Mrs. Peck's lodge. What are you trying to pull?"

"I'm not—" The man was almost frantic. "Nothing! No, Mr. Campbell. My—that—well, it was something else. . . . How did you know I was at Mrs. Peck's last night?"

"Her daughter told me," Humphrey admitted. "One of our operators made a little mistake in identification—said Miss Peck was somewhere else. Miss Peck was indignant, and rightly so. She told us you had seen her at her mother's lodge."

Beaumont groped for the ash-tray, mashed the cigar in the glass. He looked ill. He said: "All right. I'll see you later, Mr. Campbell." He rose and stood with his hands on the desk top.

"I don't know about that," Humphrey said doggedly. "I've got a hunch—well, I'm not so sure you didn't get me in here to pump me."

"No, no! I assure you, Mr. Campbell, I'm not representing Mrs. Borsden." He seemed to be having trouble getting his breath.

"I hope not," said Humphrey. He crossed the room and held out his hand. "You—oh sure, I can. I know I can trust you."

"You bet," said Beaumont, and took the extended hand. He was pumping it when yells began drifting up from the street. Humphrey knew without separating the words what those yells meant.

"Publisher murdered," excited voices were shrieking. "Extra. Ax murder of Mrs. Peck."

Beaumont dropped Humphrey's hand. "Oh, my God!" he said, and Humphrey couldn't decide whether there was fear, horror or relief in the man's tone.

A TROOP of Girl Scouts had found the body. The boat was nosed into the bank just below the picnic grounds, and a half a dozen Scouts decided to do a little salvage work. They struggled with the craft, and then Miss Harriet

Topham, the muscular scout-mistress, who had a deep voice and a suggestion of a mustache, said they must be careful or they would strain their little insides. She had on shorts, so she took off her shoes, waded out and pulled the boat up on the bank. Then she showed them how easy it was to right an overturned craft. You lifted the edge just a little, and that broke the vacuum, and then there was nothing to it.

"Like this," said Miss Topham. . . . She let out a bel-low, and dropped the nose of the red boat. One of the Scouts shrieked.

"In the boat," the kid yelled. "It's in there. A body. Nekkid."

Some C.C.C. boys who were building stone stoves over on the other side of the grounds came bounding like fawns, and in a moment they had the boat right-side up. Miss Topham recovered her composure enough to herd her charges away from the gruesome find.

It wasn't far to the sheriff's substation. One of the C.C.C. boys high-tailed it into the village, routed Lem Adams out of a barroom. "Murder!" the boy said. "A dame."

"Come on," Adams said. "What are you gabbing about?"

"We found a naked dame in a boat."

"Dead?"

"Gosh, yes," the boy said. "I told you it was murder."

"What makes you think it's murder? See it happen?"

"I got eyes," the boy said. "She's all chopped up."

"Whyn't you say so?" Lem said. He ambled across the street to his office, picked up the phone and told the girl to get him Sheriff Anders in Joaquin. Anders wasn't there, but the chief deputy was, so Lem told him to send a couple of guys out in a fast car and maybe bring the coroner along.

LEM stared at the body for a while; then he got out the stub of a pencil and took down Miss Topham's name and the names of the C.C.C. boys and told them to beat it. He was sitting by the boat smoking and talking to the guy in charge of the C.C.C. bunch when two boys from the sheriff's homicide squad tore up to the picnic grounds with the siren going. Right behind them was the coroner's car.

"There she is," Lem said.

"It aint no suicide, that's sure," one of the homicide boys said. . . .

The *News* had a slightly different version of the story, because by the time the paper got around to printing it, the body had been identified. According to the *News*, Adams was horror-stricken, only able to murmur, "I'll find out who committed this terrible crime if it's the last thing I do." When word that it was Mrs. Peck who had been hacked up reached the *News* city room, one side-bar story had it, there was shocked silence and then one reporter cried: "Oh, God, it can't be true!"

It was Swett who made the swift identification possible. Mrs. Peck had had a nine-o'clock appointment with C. Austin Cradick, president of the First National Bank, and she hadn't kept it. Swett called the lodge and then he called the house, and then he went down and asked the managing editor if he knew where Mrs. Peck was. The managing editor didn't. Neither did the city editor. Swett was standing by the city desk when a rewrite man who had taken a story from the police reporter tossed the first take in front of the city editor. The lead read:

The body of a nude unidentified woman, apparently the victim of a brutal murder, was found in an upside down rowboat on the east bank of the river this morning.

"I wonder," Swett said, pointing at the piece of copy paper.

The city editor looked up. "Well?"

"Could that be Mrs. Peck?" Swett looked scared.

The city editor snorted. He started to say something about what he hoped, then remembered Swett was close to the boss, so he held his tongue.

"She's missing," Swett said. "She failed to keep an appointment. That isn't like her at all. Shouldn't we check?"

"Now look here," said the city editor gently. "What will the cops think if we tell them maybe that is our publisher's body floating around in a rowboat."

"You never know," Swett said ominously.

"We do that, and Mrs. Peck finds out, and what do we tell her?"

Swett pulled his lips into a straight line for a minute. "I heard a man threaten her yesterday," he said primly. "I heard her son-in-law say he should have split her head open."

"You what?"

"Joe Borsden," said Swett.

"Oh, God," the city editor sighed, "what next! But could you identify her? This says the body's naked."

"Mrs. Peck has a peculiar scar on her left arm," Swett said. "Just above the elbow. She was burned as a child on a hot-water bottle."

"All right," the city editor said. "We'll check." And he hustled a young reporter named Craig off to the morgue to find out. Half an hour later the young man returned, breathless.

"The scar," Craig said. "It's there!"

The city editor dropped the phone.

"Hold everything," he yelled. "Somebody knocked off Mrs. Peck."

There was absolute silence for a moment. Then one of the rewrite men spoke: "Don't anybody move until the cops get here," he said in a stage whisper. "You're all suspects."

CHAPTER ELEVEN



ROBBIE parked her car on the rough track above the bridge and walked down through the willows to the water's edge. The steady beat of a one-cylinder gasoline engine came across the water as she stood on the bank and stared out at the barge. She could see Joe Borsden's strong figure bent over the sluice-box.

It was some time before she could attract his attention. She tried yelling; she tried throwing stones—not very successfully—toward the barge. She waved her arms; she yelled some more. Then Borsden straightened, turned and saw her. He shut the motor off, called, "Hello!"

Robbie beckoned to him. "Come here," she called back.

Borsden slid his canvas kayak off the barge, climbed in and paddled across the bright strip of water, bringing the boat skillfully to a spot just below where Robbie waited.

"Been here long?" His left hand smothered her small right hand, held it.

"Not long." Robbie tried to smile back. She didn't feel like smiling. Humphrey Campbell's crisp order remained in her consciousness—"Tell him to hot-foot it to the sheriff's office," Humphrey had said. "If he won't go, drag him there." She thought of Mrs. Peck's mutilated body in the boat, of the ominous black headlines on the front page of the *News*, and shuddered.

"What's up?"

"They found the body," Robbie said.

Joe nodded. "Didn't take long," he said thoughtfully. "Mr. Campbell wants you to go right to the sheriff's office."

"Why?"

"He said you should go there before they start after you."

Joe nodded again. "I'll drive you in," Robbie told him. "On the way I can tell you what you are to say."

They walked up the hill to her battered roadster, and Joe helped her under the wheel. She liked the feel of his fingers on her arm—strong fingers. He got in beside her, didn't speak until the car was on the road rattling toward Joaquin through the lush bottom-lands. "Let's have it."

"You're to say you were in town and saw the paper," Robbie explained. "You're to tell them you want to do anything you can to help."

"Have I seen Campbell?"

"Yes. You went to him about the custody matter. You hired him to work on that. He says to be truthful about everything except what happened this morning."

"What's Campbell doing?"

"Right after you left, he went out to the lodge. He was gone a long time. When he came back, he had me find out who a man named Don Skeel was. Then he went across the hall and talked to Mr. Beaumont. That was when the paper came out about Mrs. Peck."

"Skeel—who is he?"

"He manages the *News* radio station."

Joe leaned back and lit a cigarette. He stared moodily at the road that climbed up now to the top of the bluff and ran along its edge. Below was the river and the green fields on either side. He asked: "Where was she murdered?"

"In the woodshed," Robbie said. "With a double-bitted ax."

"When?"

"They think early this morning. About six."

"Suppose they ask me about the boat," Borsden said. "About seeing it? If it floated by in broad daylight, I couldn't have missed seeing it."

"Mr. Campbell said you might casually mention seeing something float by. You might say you were busy and paid no attention."

"Well, I had a few months of peace." He spoke softly.

"Everything will be all right," Robbie comforted.

He laughed. "No. I'm in for it. They'll charge me with murder and put me in jail," Joe said. "I haven't any doubt of that."

"Oh, no." She took her hand from the wheel and put it on his sleeve. "Mr. Campbell will prove you didn't do anything."

"I hope so."

"They won't put you in jail. They couldn't do that."

"I won't mind that part of it so much. What I'll mind is having the past shoved down my throat." He studied her profile. "How much do you know, Robbie?"

She liked it when he used her name. "Not very much."

"I don't want to go back," Joe said. "The first thing, I'll be pitying myself again. That won't do, Robbie. I've worked things out pretty well. Managed to convince myself that I lost nothing, really."

"Nothing," Robbie echoed. "The hand or—her."

"I never had her. And it's not this." He hit his black glove on his knee. "Rather, what it represents. Conceit, Robbie. I thought I was great. I wasn't. The world goes along without me just as well. The music's there, and there's always some one to play it. When she cut it off—"

Robbie took her gaze off the road, stared at him momentarily. "What?"

"Of course, you don't know. Mrs. Peck threw a hatchet at me. That's how I lost the hand."

Robbie bit her underlip. Horror surged up in her. "They'll—they'll—"

"Say I killed her because of that. Yes."

"She deserved killing," Robbie said bitterly.

"For that? No."

Again she shot a quick glance at him. "Why was she killed, Joe?"

"You doubt me?"

"No, no," she protested.

"I can't make even *you* understand." Joe smiled wryly.

"I won't fare well with the law, will I?"

"But I do understand."

"Your mind does, perhaps. Your heart doesn't. I lost a wife and a hand because of Mrs. Peck. What better reason for murder?"

THEY didn't speak again until they reached the courthouse park. "Here I leave you," Joe said. She stopped the car. He gestured toward the ugly bulk of the jail. "Maybe they'll let me have visitors."

She tried to make her smile bright. "I'll bring you cigarettes, and sugar and cream."

"And your bright and shining soul," said Joe. "Bring that too."

CHAPTER TWELVE



L SHELBOURNE, the chief of police, wasn't the sort of man who looked well in a uniform. He pushed his nose down in his beer-mug, then banged the mug on the table and wiped foam off his thick lips. He said: "Jeez, that's good."

"Let's have another," Oscar said. They sat in a curtained booth in the café around the corner from the city hall. Across the table, Humphrey was playing tiddly-winks with a dime, a fifty-cent piece and a water-glass. It was seven o'clock. Mrs. Peck had been in the morgue exactly seven hours. Oscar pushed a button, and when the waiter poked his face through the curtains, ordered two more beers, and three rare steaks.

"Them was the days," Shelbourne said reminiscently. He and Oscar had been reminiscing for thirty minutes about their sojourn together on the San Francisco police force. While the anecdotes were colorful enough—neither Oscar nor Shelbourne had been model officers—Humphrey was beginning to fidget. He said: "Think they're getting tough with Borsden?"

Shelbourne sucked at a tooth. "Sure. Them boys play rough. Got the habit."

Humphrey asked: "What goes on?"

"All I know is what I got from the boys in the press-room," Shelbourne said. "Anders and Hyatt aren't asking for help yet." He emphasized the *yet*. "They figure she was knocked off around six—when she went out to the woodshed to get stuff for the fire. They got the coroner looking her over. He says because she was shoved in the river right after the murder, it aint easy to be exact."

"Anything else?"

"They dug up her clothes," Shelbourne said.

"They did? Where?"

"Right alongside the wharf in the mud. Slippers, dressing-gown, pants and brassiere."

"Footprints?"

"Nary a one. Whoever done it was slick. You can see where he laid some boards down. Stood on the boards and buried the clothes. Turned a hose on the boards. Slick as hell. Anders is all puffed up because he found the clothes. There was a shovel with some mud on the blade, and he looked at it and did some powerful deducting, and pretty soon he dug up the clothes."

"As simple as that," said Humphrey. "Are they trying to pin it on Borsden?"

"The newspaper boys seem to think so. Anders and Hyatt aint talking much about that yet. Won't say what they've got on Borsden. All they've give out so far is how they think the murder was done, and who was out to the lodge last night."

"Who?"

"Let's see—" Shelbourne considered. The beer and steak came while he was trying to remember, so he considered food and drink for a while. He said between gulps and mouthfuls: "Dame named Otis. Then Mrs. Peck's daughter and Don Skeel. Then that low-life Beaumont." He bit his chunk of steak savagely.

"That the list?"

"There was Swett," Shelbourne went on, "—Mrs. Peck's secretary. Went out there late, around ten."

"Well, well," said Humphrey. "The list grows. Energetic fellows."

Shelbourne snorted. "They better be. The crime record in the county aint so good. And I forgot: they had a test. Loaded a sack of sand in a boat, turned over

and let her go. To see how long it took to go the seven miles."

"How long?"

"The boat hung up in the willows. She's still there. Or was, around five." He laughed. "Then they tried a couple of others. Give 'em a good push. And the deputy who was pushing fell in. And nearly drowned. One of the boats hung up on the bridge. The other kept agoing. Made it in two hours. But what does that prove?"

Humphrey agreed that it proved nothing. "This Beaumont guy intrigues me," Humphrey said. "What's the set-up?"

Shelbourne gave him a quick look. "How you mean?"

"The billboards. Beaumont seems to be getting a little personal. And did you notice the sudden switch the *News* made yesterday? From Beaumont to Price. How do you figure that out?"

"Don't figure," said Shelbourne. "Never try to figure out newspapers."

"In other elections, who got the *News* support?"

"Price."

"But this time Beaumont had it until yesterday. How about that?"

"Maybe she was sticking the hooks into Price to keep him in line," Shelbourne said.

"Who runs the rackets in the county?" Humphrey wanted to know.

"Aint any rackets in Joaquin County," Shelbourne said.

"I suppose not," Humphrey said. "Thought I'd ask, though. Beaumont."

He let the name hang in the air. It seemed to please Shelbourne, who asked: "You know Borsden told Hyatt you was working for him? Hyatt's on your tail."

"Honest men have nothing to fear," said Oscar with great solemnity.

"You!" Shelbourne said. "Unless you changed, you don't know what that word means." He heaved himself up.

"I gotta run along."

"I'll drop by tomorrow sometime," Oscar said.

"See you then." Shelbourne shoved himself through the curtain.

"Rackets," said Oscar reprovingly. "Such tact!"

"How did I know he was sensitive?"

"He isn't. It's the times," said Oscar. "They make him jumpy."

"You know the set-up?"

OSCAR nodded, looked at his empty beer-mug, put his finger on the button, held out a stein. A hand took it, disappeared. "The usual," Oscar said. "Price and Shelbourne and the boys cleaning up. Another gang of thieves standing around drooling."

"Anders and Hyatt?"

"Not Anders. He's honest, but lazy. Hyatt, yes. He's ambitious. Wants to be governor. Been building up a slick machine. Cutting in on Price's territory."

"Who runs the rackets around town? Price may collect, but he doesn't run them."

"Shelbourne didn't say. He was cagey about that. I've heard rumors, though. A guy named Allison Jones seems to be pretty powerful."

"He hasn't gone over to Hyatt by any chance?"

"Might be."

"I wish I could figure what that sudden *News* switch meant," said Humphrey. "What have you turned up?"

"Odds and ends. Put a man in Santa Paula on checking up on Joe's mother. She and the kid are off somewhere."

"Probably hiding the kid out because of the custody proceedings."

"Perhaps. I did some checking on Don Skeel. He runs the *News* radio station and has been taking Irene Peck places."

"Well, well," said Oscar. "Sex."

"There's Borsden," said Humphrey. "Minus a hand, a career and a wife. If anyone had reason for a bit of butchery, he did."

Oscar didn't like the thought. "Let the law worry about him. He's got dough."

"Then I'll give you Mary Otis."

"Why?"

"One good client less. Maybe a yen. She's big enough and strong enough. If you don't like her, there's Beaumont."

"And Irene. Don't forget Irene."

"Girls don't go around killing their mammas."

"I knew one once who did."

"You know lovely people. Like Al Shelbourne. Let's not clutter up the case with Irene. Skeel, maybe. Why? I haven't the slightest idea."

Oscar frowned at the rest of his beer. "We need that dough, Humphrey. We need it bad."

"We also need fresh air," said Humphrey. "I don't like Hyatt's attitude."

"Ah," Oscar rasped. "What can he do?"

"Find out I was at the lodge this morning and slap an accessory charge on us. . . . Problems? We're lousy with them: The sudden switch in the *News'* policy; the paper Irene glommed; what Otis wanted and what Beaumont wanted. Who was the guy I saw there this morning, and why was he there."

"Sweet," said Oscar. "He was out there last night. How about him?"

"A rabbit. He wouldn't chop himself out of a job."

"Please," said Oscar. "You make it so very messy." He pushed the button, got the check and paid it. Humphrey followed him through the noisy café into the night. There was a moon, a big one, with a ring around it.

"Even the city hall looks pure tonight," Oscar said.

"It will take more than moonlight to cleanse that place. How long will the people stand for it?"

"Those dopes!" said Oscar. He waved good-night and trudged away.

Humphrey stood on the quiet corner looking up at the sky and then he thought of Robbie. . . . This wouldn't do, he thought. Standing in the dark, mooning!

HIS apartment house was dark. He let himself in the side door and went quietly up the two flights of stairs. Inside, he flicked on the light-switch. Then he wished he had stayed outside. There was a man sitting on the davenport, and the man had a violin-case across his knees. He wasn't a complete stranger. Humphrey had talked to him before. He had talked to him at Mrs. Peck's lodge.

"Where's your badge?" the man said. He smiled sourly and kept his hands on the lid of the violin-case. Humphrey would have liked it much better if the guy had a pistol—pistols were nice, clean weapons.

"Did you put the kettle on?" Humphrey closed the door.

"What for?"

"Tea," said Humphrey. "You seem quite at home."

"I am."

"I thought you looked esthetic," said Humphrey. "But not that esthetic. Ever try the accordion?"

"No," the man said, with considerable distaste.

"What's wrong with an accordion?"

"It needs a monkey."

"I resent that."

"Sit down and shut up," the man said.

Humphrey sat. He started to put his hand in his pocket.

"None of that!"

"Cigarettes?"

"On the table."

Humphrey got one, lit it. "You?"

"Don't smoke."

Humphrey indicated the violin-case. "Fiddle?"

"Sure. What do you think? I'm on my way home from orchestra practice." He laughed soundlessly.

"My name's Campbell. I'm a private detective."

"Well, now," the man said, "isn't that fine! Mine's Jones. I run a clothing store."

"I don't need anything."

"Not even a shroud?"

"Let's get it over with," said Humphrey. "I'm tired."

"What's your game?"

"I told you. I'm a private detective."

"That isn't news. Why the act at her joint this morning?"

"Neither of us had any business there," Humphrey said. "So we're even. You won't tell the law, and neither will I."

The man laughed again. "Worried, huh? About the law finding you were there."

"Not me."

"Nor me," the man said.

"You should have looked in the wall safe." Humphrey measured the distance to the couch with an appraising eye. One jump would be enough; and the fiddle-case was closed. "A cinch, too. Like a post-office box."

"And what was I after?"

"A paper," Humphrey said. He knew the shot went home.

"Where is it?" The man was sitting forward now, and his thumbs seemed ready to flip the case open.

"Put away."

"Dig it out."

"Not here. I've been around."

"You want to keep being around? This is not a healthy town. In the summer it gets hot. In the winter it gets cold. Where is it?"

"There's another customer, so I think I'll wait," said Humphrey.

"You think so."

"Yes. I can afford to go to the cops. I don't want to, but I can. You can't, Mr. Jones."

"I won't." He made it ominous.

"And until you know where that paper is, you won't push me around."

Humphrey was sitting forward, his hands on his knees. He looked relaxed, but he wasn't. His toes dug into the carpet, and the muscles on his legs knotted. Then he moved. He was across the room, and his arms were around the other, and his body was pushing the fiddle-case into Jones' flat belly.

"Damn you!" There was fright in the cry. "Look out!"

Humphrey swung him off the couch, lay on him, groped for the fiddle-case. It occurred to him that Jones was offering surprisingly little resistance.

He sat up, and now his knees were on the man's arms, pinning them down. He bent left, caught the fiddle-case and pulled it to him, flipped it open. He said: "I'll be damned!" Then he got up. The smaller man reached out frantically.

"It really is a fiddle," Humphrey said, and gave it to him.

"I told you it was." He had the instrument out and was fondling it.

"Sorry," said Humphrey. He moved to the door, opened it. "Run along and practice."

Jones didn't move in a hurry. He put the violin back in the case, held it carefully under his arm. His voice got hard again. "Remember what I told you. This town isn't healthy." And with that he was gone.

Humphrey dropped on the couch and shook his head. This, he mused, was the damndest case. Now Mr. Jones and his fiddle had to come along and complicate it even more. Jones—Allison Jones! The guy who ran the rackets. Such an esthetic fellow, too.

He smiled to himself, picked up the phone, got the long-distance operator. He called a detective named Niemeyer in Santa Paula, and after he had talked to him, he called San Francisco and talked to Max Hilton on the *Recorder*. Then he went to bed.



BY midmorning, that Wednesday, it was evident the district attorney of the county was clearing up the Peck case with speed and dispatch. With no notice to the citizens, he dragged the coroner out to the scene, rounded up a jury and held a hurried, perfunctory inquest. The jury heard the county medical examiner's report on the cause of death. She had been hacked to death with a double-bitted ax. At what time? Well, apparently around six Tuesday morning. The medical examiner said he couldn't be too sure, but everything pointed to that time. Then the jury heard Hymer Jackson, the managing editor of the *News*, identify the body, heard the testimony of Sheriff Lou Anders as to what he thought had happened at the lodge, and the testimony of Deputy Lem Adams about how the body was discovered; they went out for a few minutes and came back with the usual verdict in such cases—death at the hands of a person or persons unknown.

After it was over, Hyatt hurried back to his office, and rang for his secretary.

"All here?" he wanted to know.

His gray-haired secretary nodded. "There's a man from the San Francisco *Recorder* too."

Hyatt frowned. "Tell him I'm busy."

"I told him that. He says he'll wait."

"Let him talk to Anders. No. Send him in."

The secretary withdrew, returned a moment later with a squat, owlish little man with a long face and a droll expression.

"Mr. Hilton," the secretary said, and vanished.

Hyatt nodded curtly. "You're with the *Recorder*?"

"Right."

"But," Hyatt said, "I thought Bill Yates of the *News* covered for the *Recorder*."

"Ordinarily, yes. We decided to give this special coverage."

"I see," said Hyatt.

Without being asked, Hilton sat. He lighted a cigarette and blinked at Hyatt. "I'd like to talk to Joe Borsden."

"That's impossible at the moment."

"He's under arrest, then?"

"No. We're—ah—still questioning him."

"You expect to arrest him?"

Hyatt found dignity. "Mr. Hilton, we have no announcement to make as yet. When we do, we'll notify you."

"That will be when?"

"I don't know."

Hilton jerked a stubby thumb toward the door. "The crowd yonder. What does that mean?"

"Please, Mr. Hilton. I've nothing for you at the moment."

"Beaumont's out there, and Price," Hilton said. "I recognize them. Is it one of your theories that Mrs. Peck's murder stems from the mayoralty campaign?"

Hyatt scowled. "I told you, Mr. Hilton—"

"I know you did. But, Mr. Hyatt, I'm a confused man. The *News*"—he gestured airily—"naturally is working with you. From the paper and the dispatches we've received, we can't make head nor tail of what goes on. Is such secrecy necessary?"

"Until we have completed the preliminary investigation. Yes. Now if you'll be patient—"

"I'm very patient," Hilton said, and stood up. "I'm at the Joaquin Hotel. Will you call me there when the announcement's ready?"

"Be glad to," Hyatt returned on a smile. But when Hilton was out in the hall, the smile went away. He snapped down the switch on the office phone. "Check on that guy," he said. "Find out if he's really on the *Recorder*."

Max Hilton had company in his room on the eighth floor. Humphrey Campbell was stretched out on the bed, his hands locked behind his neck.

Hilton shut the door, made a wry face. "A sour one."

"But smart. He has a tail on me," Humphrey said. "And he has no respect for a man's privacy whatever. My home phone is tapped, and so is my office phone. I'm having all wires sent to you."

"Fat lot of good that will do. They follow you here, and then they start following me."

"They didn't follow me here. I shook 'em. Find out anything at all from Hyatt?"

"I think he's ready to make a pinch."

"Borsden." It wasn't a question.

"He's got a flock of people in his office. I knew two of them—Beaumont and Price. Then there was a husky wench in a tailored suit."

"Mary Otis."

"I guess so. And a meek little guy."

"That would be Mrs. Peck's secretary. Good-looking guy there with curly hair? Dimple in his chin?"

Hilton nodded.

"That should be Skeel. It's Borsden, all right," Humphrey mused. "They're getting set to give him the works."

"Think they know you were out at the lodge?"

"If they don't, they're guessing I was. They'll wait around for a slip, then move in. Maybe they'll give me a little push."

"You get anywhere today?"

"Not too far," Humphrey said. "Niemeyer—that's the Santa Paula dick—picked up Joe's mother's trail in Santa Barbara. She and the kid took the daylight to Los Angeles. Niemeyer's down there trying to find them."

A knock interrupted him. "For me," he said. "I took the liberty of making this a field office. Our attorney should be without."

ATTORNEY WILLIAM CHAPMAN had an expectant look on his face and a fat brief-case under his arm. He was short, square, and wore a blue polka-dot bow tie.

"Good day," he said briskly. "Which is Mr. Campbell?"

"I am," said Humphrey. "This is Max Hilton of the *Recorder*. You can trust him."

"You hope," said Hilton.

Chapman put his brief-case on the floor, took the chair near it. "What's the trouble?"

"Murder," said Humphrey.

Chapman didn't bat an eye. He waited.

"In an hour or so, Hyatt's going to charge a man named Joe Borsden with the murder of his mother-in-law. I want you to represent him."

"I've done little criminal work."

"You've been handling labor cases in the valley," Humphrey said. "That shows you don't give a damn. Borsden needs someone like that. He'll have the *News* on his neck. I know you're not afraid of the *News*. At least you never have been."

"Borsden asked you to get someone to represent him?"

"He hired me to handle this case. I can't do it without an attorney."

"All right. Let's have the picture."

Humphrey gave it to him. He slid back on the bed and put his shoulders against the wall and started talking. He began with the Borsden divorce and followed the sordid tragic story right through to the end, omitting nothing. Chapman listened, frowning now and then; and when Humphrey was done, he sat in silence for a little while.

He said presently: "I don't like it."

"Neither do I, but that's how it is."

"Borsden should have called in the law when he found the body," Chapman grumbled. "You should have stayed away from the lodge."

"He didn't call the law. He let the body float on down and came to us. By that time it was too late. Anyway, I'm

glad he didn't. It gave me a little time to nose around before they clamped down. Not enough time, though. That's why I need you. I want you to appear for Borsden, plead him not guilty. Then rush through a preliminary hearing. Hyatt isn't taking any chances. He brushed off the inquest this morning, which means he doesn't want his witnesses to talk."

"Now look here," Chapman objected: "You ask me to take the case of a man who had every reason in the world for murdering Mrs. Peck. From here, a life sentence looks generous. I'd say he was guilty as hell."

"You'll have to take my word that he isn't. Last year, if she had been chopped up, yes. But not now."

"Give me someone else with a motive, then?"

"I can't now. I haven't dug deep enough."

"As it stands, I want no part of it."

"You want to see an innocent man sent up on circumstantial evidence?"

"Of course not," Chapman protested.

"There are others in this—Beaumont, Don Skeel, Allison Jones, Mary Otis, Price. The only thing I'm sure of is that Hyatt wants to get this over with in a hurry."

"Don't tell me Hyatt is tied into a murder," Chapman said dryly.

"I won't. But he might be mixed up in dirty politics. Consider this: He was our first visitor Monday morning—walked in and suggested we close up shop."

Chapman's reply was a sardonic grin.

"You're saying this is a political murder, then?"

"It could be. I won't say that, though. I'll say Hyatt wants to clean it up in a hurry and doesn't want us messing around. Why?"

"So you want me to be a crusader?"

"Aren't you? Harry Dunecht told me you were. I went to Dunecht, and that's how I got your name."

Chapman grinned again. "I know that. I wouldn't be here if Dunecht hadn't said you were all right. He holds you in high regard for the way you solved the murder of his father. But I'm not a crusader. I've certain theories about government, that's all. About the rights of the little people."

"This concerns them."

"But mostly it concerns your client."

"You won't represent us?"

"Sure I will," said Chapman. "Because of the send-off Dunecht gave you, I'm taking the Borsden case. But I'm counting on you, remember that. Unless you turn up something, Borsden's damned close to the death row." He rose, picked up his brief-case. He was on the way out when the phone rang.

"Here it comes," said Humphrey, and handed the instrument to Max Hilton.

"Mr. Hilton?" a feminine voice told him.

"Yes," Hilton replied.

"Here's Mr. Hilton for you, Mr. Hyatt," the voice said. You could hear Hyatt's voice all over the hotel room. "Hilton? Got a story for you. Joe Borsden just signed a confession."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



ICE to have known you," Chapman said. He put on his hat, twisted his face into what might pass for a smile.

"Wait," Humphrey told him.

"I'm not having any, thanks."

"If Borsden doesn't need you, I will," Humphrey said. "I'm going to work, and Hyatt won't like it. If he slaps me into the can, I want you around to get me out."

"You still believe Borsden's innocent?"

"I know he's innocent," Humphrey said. "Innocent and idiotic."

"Go on, Mr. Campbell."

"With luck, I'll have the reason for his confession in your office by tonight."

"A rubber hose?" Hilton asked.

"Nothing as gentle as that," Humphrey replied. "Max, you cut down to Hyatt's office and get hold of a copy of his confession. You can probably wangle it out of them. It will be full of holes. Has to be. Give it to Mr. Chapman. If you can get the statements of any of the others, do it. Maybe you can get your boss to put the screws on them. I'll leave that to you. Then go down and talk to Anders. You'll find him reasonable though probably a little bewildered. Promise him a full-page picture—anything. Get him around to the subject of finger-prints and lipstick. Good-by, boys." And he was gone.

TAKING the elevator to the basement, he nodded to the attendant, went up the ramp to the street. When he came to a drugstore, he went in and called Robbie.

"There's a man here," Robbie said when she heard his voice.

"With a badge?"

"He didn't say."

"What's his name?"

"He didn't say that."

"Tell him I've gone home," Humphrey said. "You might as well go home too. Take a cab and charge it to the office. It's too nice a day to work."

"But—"

"Home," said Humphrey. "Tell Oscar he can take the day off too."

"Oh," Robbie said. She seemed to be thinking the matter over. She added: "That's very nice of you."

"I'm a considerate man," said Humphrey. "One more thing: If a package came from Santa Paula, take that home with you and work on it tonight."

"It came."

"Fine," said Humphrey. "That will keep you out of mischief." He hung up and smiled at the phone. There, he told himself, was the kind of girl a man needed in his business.

He was waiting across the street from her boarding-house when a cab pulled up a quarter of an hour later. He ran over, opened the door, slid in beside her. "Santa Fe station," he told the driver.

No one was following them. He patted her hand. "Oscar go home?"

"No. He said he would be in Shelbourne's office—for you to call him there."

"Sometimes I think Oscar is a brilliant man," Humphrey said. "What about our friend? Did he look like a cop?"

"He just looked mean."

"Follow you out?"

She shook her head. "He stayed in the hall."

"He didn't go into Beaumont's office, by any chance?"

"He was standing outside our office when I got in the elevator. I think he was waiting for Mr. Morgan."

"A cop." Humphrey opened the flat package that lay in her lap, and took out a photograph. It was the picture of a woman and a little boy. He stared at the woman's strong kind face, passed the picture to Robbie. "We're going to find her," he said. "I figure she'll be in one of the hotels near the railroad or bus stations. I'll start at the Santa Fe. You go out in front of the station with me, then duck through and catch a cab. Go down to the Southern Pacific and start from there. Don't bother with dumps. Pick the kind of quiet places a nice woman would choose. If you find her, call Oscar at the police station. He'll leave word where he's going to be."

"If I don't?"

"There's a little Spanish restaurant on Wasco Street a couple of blocks from your house. Meet me there at six."

She nodded. He knew she wanted to ask questions, and his admiration for her went up ten more points. A young

woman with a head on her. He said: "You like Joe Borsden, don't you?"

She didn't look at him. Her voice was barely audible: "Yes."

"Don't worry when you see the paper, then."

Her fingers dug into his arm. "What—"

"It will say he's confessed," Humphrey explained. "He has. But it doesn't mean anything, so don't worry."

Robbie bit her lip. Her hand held his arm tightly.

"It's all right," Humphrey assured her. "He didn't do it. Now I'll see you at six. Maybe before. If we've cleaned up this job by then, I'll have another one for you."

Her eyes sought his face.

"I'll send you up to see Borsden," Humphrey promised.

"Here we are," the driver said and opened the door.

Humphrey put a ten-dollar bill in his hand, winked at him. "Do a chore for me?"

"Sure."

"Go in and get a reservation for Mr. Williams on the four o'clock streamliner for L. A. Buy a ticket and bring it back here. What's left over is yours."

"Thanks, Mr. Williams."

"And if anyone should ask, don't remember too much."

Robbie was gone when the taxi-driver came back with the ticket. "Thanks, old man," Humphrey said.

Humphrey waited until he was out of sight, crossed the street to a fly-specked joint that advertised cocktails for a dime, went past the dirty bar to the back, where a phone booth stood open, stepped in and closed the door.

Oscar was cloveted with the chief of police, and Oscar was a bit distraught. "See the papers?" he wanted to know.

"Out already, huh?"

"What we going to do, Humphrey?"

"You're going to set up office in the nearest beer joint. Leave word with Shelbourne's girl where that is. Take Shelbourne along for company if you can, because that will impress the boys from the sheriff's office. I think there is one on your tail."

"You mean the guy who was in the office?"

"Didn't he follow you?"

"Sure. But he doesn't want me. He's after you."

"That's fine. I'm on a train for Los Angeles. You might adroitly pass the word on."

"It shall be done."

"Our beautiful secretary will call you aftor a while. She'll have a message for me. If it's good news, tell her to stay put with the dame. I'll keep calling and find out where she is and meet her there. Buy Shelbourne a lot of drinks, and get around to the subject of Allison Jones. Drop the hint that Mr. Jones is doing a bit of double-crossing. And give the chief my love."

Oscar sighed. "I hope you know what you're doing."

ROBBBIE found the woman. It was a little after five and Robbie had used her smile on the room-clerks of four hotels when she entered the Sutter House half a block from the Greyhound bus station. The hotel was small, clean and fairly new.

There was a young, bespectacled man behind the desk, and when the baggageless Robbie came in, he put on a prim look. Robbie matched it with one of embarrassment and distress. "Good afternoon—" she said hesitantly.

"Yes?" The thin dark face grew a little more pleasant.

"I'm looking for my aunt," said Robbie.

Black eyes searched her face. "Name?"

"It should be Morgan but maybe it isn't," said Robbie.

"You see, she's—well, she's peculiar."

The eyes still searched her face suspiciously.

"My aunt," said Robbie, "has become very erratic. She keeps running away. She comes downtown and goes to hotels, and uses other names."

The suspicious look evaporated. The clerk made a sympathetic sound.

"Here she is," said Robbie, and held out the picture. "Has she been here? I hope so, because I'm very tired. I've tried pretty nearly every hotel in town."

The clerk regarded the picture, looked back at Robbie, let his gaze rest on the picture again.

"She's really all right," Robbie said hurriedly. "Just a little odd, that's all. She gets very angry sometimes when I tell her she must go home. But after I talk to her awhile, she's all right. Not a bit violent, hardly."

"Maybe—" said the clerk.

"No, no," Robbie said. "It's all right. I can handle her. I'm the only one who can."

"She's in Room 403," the clerk said.

Robbie gave a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness!"

"It must be tough on you."

"I don't mind," Robbie said. "You see, I love her. She's all I have."

She hurried to the elevator, got in before he could change his mind and pushed the button. At the door of 403, she knocked timidly.

"Yes," a woman's voice said.

"Towels," said Robbie.

"Leave them outside, please."

"Against the rules," said Robbie. "I'll come back later."

"Just a minute," the voice said. Then the door was open, and Robbie pushed through it and into the room. For a moment she was so frightened she could hardly breathe, for the older woman towered above her and the woman was scowling at her angrily. Robbie found her voice. "Mrs. Borsden, it's about Joe."

"Who are you?" Mrs. Borsden was nearly as big as her son, a squarely built, muscular woman with graying hair and a face with too much jaw.

"A friend of Joe's."

"What about him?"

Robbie stood with her back to the door, leaning against it. Mrs. Borsden moved backward a few steps. "He's in trouble, awful trouble." Robbie's voice shook.

The strong, almost masculine face relaxed. The eyes found fear. "Sit down, child."

Robbie crossed to a chair, took a deep breath and smiled at Mrs. Borsden. "You've got to help him. That's why I'm here."

"The murder—" She let the word trail off.

Robbie nodded. "He's confessed to it."

"Oh, my God!" Mrs. Borsden said.

"But he didn't do it, Mrs. Borsden."

"No, no."

"We're going to prove he didn't do it," Robbie said. "With your help."

"How can I help?"

"By talking to Humphrey Campbell. He's working for your son. Will you see him?"

Mrs. Borsden nodded.

Robbie rose, picked up the phone.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

HUMPHREY stood with his hands shoved into the pockets of his blue flannel jacket, looking down at Joe Borsden's mother. He said, "Mrs. Borsden, I want the truth." "Of course," She had a low sweet voice. "When did you get here?"

"Monday afternoon."

"Where's Rolfe?"

"I left him with the wife of my attorney in Los Angeles."

"What did you do when you got here?"

"I called Mrs. Peck at the office. She wouldn't see me."

"She knew who was calling?"

"Yes. I gave her secretary my name and waited, and then he said she wouldn't talk to me or see me."

"What did you do then?"

"I stayed here until five, and then I went to the *News* office and waited outside for Mrs. Peck. But she didn't come out. I waited for about an hour; then I called her office and the secretary said she had gone for the day."

"Go on."

"I had a sandwich. Hadn't eaten all day and I felt faint. Then I took a cab and went out to Mrs. Peck's house."

"The lodge?"

"No. The one here in town. The maid said she wasn't home. I asked to see"—she swallowed as though the name was distasteful—"Irene. She wasn't home, either. I said I was an old friend from New York and that I would only be in town a few hours and asked the maid if she could tell me where Mrs. Peck was. She said she didn't know. So I came back to the hotel."

"You didn't go out to see Joe?"

She shook her head. "I didn't want him to know I was here."

"Why not?"

"When he called me Sunday, he told me to stay away. Said it would only make things worse. You see, Irene and I never got along. We didn't like each other."

HUMPHREY walked to the window. There was a handful of pink clouds high in the east. Across the street a man in his shirt sleeves was standing in front of a pawn shop. A bus came out of the station down the block and headed south. He said without turning: "You went out to the lodge, didn't you?"

Her reply was faint. "Yes. How did you know?"

He answered her with a question. "Why do you suppose Joe confessed?"

She said in a strangled voice: "No—not that!"

"You gave Swett your name Monday," Humphrey said. He swung around. "Swett told Hyatt you were here, and apparently Hyatt let Joe in on the secret."

"Oh—but he wouldn't—"

"Why not? You're strong enough," Humphrey said coldly. "Hyatt knows you were out at the lodge Monday night. And Joe does now. It took more than a piece of hose to make Joe confess. I'm guessing at what happened. It's a good guess."

"The fool!" she cried.

"In a pinch we're all fools," Humphrey said. "Lose our heads. Hyatt knows that. All right. What time were you out there?"

"About ten."

"Why did you wait so late to go out?"

"I had forgotten about the lodge. I stayed in the room and tried to think where I could find them. I called the house several times and they weren't home. Then I remembered the lodge. Joe told me about it—how he used to go out there on the river. I got a taxi and took it to Pollasky, and stopped at a store, and the clerk told me how to get there. So I had the taxi man take me out. The gate was locked. I had the taxi wait and walked in. I didn't knock. I tried the door, and it was open, so I went in. Mrs. Peck was sitting in front of the fire, reading." She hid her face in her hands as though Humphrey's steady gaze was more than she could bear.

He didn't speak. He sat on the edge of the bed, held his pack of cigarettes out to Robbie, big-eyed in the chair by the bureau. She shook her head. He lit one, waited. Presently Mrs. Borsden straightened, put her hands in her lap. "Mrs. Peck told me I might as well sit down. She was drinking. Filled a glass for me and asked me what I wanted. I told her it was about Rolfe. She said I might as well run along home, because she was going to see that her daughter got Rolfe back. I—well, I lost my head. I—hit her. I hit her hard. Right across the face. Her nose began to bleed, and then I was sorry and I tried to stop the blood." She hesitated, and Humphrey asked sharply:

"Did any get on your clothes?"

She nodded. "On my dress. I put ice on the back of her neck and told her I was sorry. After a bit it stopped bleeding. She poured out another drink and told me to get out. So I went."

"You came back here?"

"No. I had the driver take me to Pollasky. I wanted to see Joe very much then. So I paid for the cab and walked across the bridge. The barge was dark. I went down to the bank and thought about calling to Joe, and then I changed my mind." She looked at Humphrey, and there was terror in her eyes. "I wish I had."

"Why?"

"Then I'd be sure—"

"Sure? Of what?"

"That he was on the barge. It was dark. Maybe he wasn't there, Mr. Campbell."

"Mrs. Borsden," Humphrey said sharply, "a crack like that to the wrong people would really fix things. When you tell this story to Hyatt,—and you'll have to,—don't speculate on whether he was there or not. He was. Remember that. All right. Then what did you do?"

"Went back to Pollasky."

"You didn't come to Joaquin?"

"No. I got a room in an auto camp and spent the night there. Yesterday morning I took the bus into Joaquin." Humphrey whistled. "Why—oh, never mind. It doesn't matter now."

"I was so tired," Mrs. Borsden explained. "So very tired. I started to hunt for someone to bring me here, and then I saw the auto camp sign and got a cabin and went to bed."

"Use your own name?"

She hesitated. "No."

"And you didn't use your name at this hotel, Mrs. Borsden. Why?"

She flung out her hands. "I don't know."

"Why?"

"I didn't want—oh, I don't know."

"You didn't want what—Joe to find out? That's no reason."

She let her body slump. "Does it matter?"

"Not to me. To Hyatt it does. He hasn't traced you yet, but he will. And you'll have some explaining to do."

Her laugh was hollow. "My explanation wouldn't help."

"What is it?"

"I came up here to kill Gertrude Peck," Mrs. Borsden said. "To kill her for trying to take Rolfe, and for what she did to Joe. To his life."

"You knew, then? About his hand?"

"I knew on Sunday," Mrs. Borsden said. "Joe told me on the phone. He told me not to worry, because Mrs. Peck had cut off his hand, and if she got too tough, he'd use that to stop her."

Humphrey looked at Robbie, sitting very straight in the chair by the bureau, and that made him feel a bit better. She found a little smile for him. He jerked his thumb toward the phone.

"Call Chapman, Robbie. Tell him I'll be at the Mirador auto court two miles south of Joaquin. The name will be E. S. Gardner. You got a car?"

She nodded. "Parked back of my boarding-house."

"I'll drop you there. You drive Mrs. Borsden to Morgantown. East of town by the high school there's an auto court. A little joint. Register as Mrs.—" He grinned. "Hyatt is as good a name as any. Mrs. Hyatt and daughter. Wait there until you hear from me."

MRS. BORSDEN was pulling at her skirt, staring from one to the other. Tears ran down her cheeks, but she made no move to wipe them away.

"Get your things together, Mrs. Borsden," Humphrey said kindly.

She didn't move, but sat there crying silently. Humphrey got up, flipped open her wardrobe case, which stood on the

stand at the foot of the bed and started tossing her belongings into it. Robbie was on the phone. As he gathered toilet articles from the dresser top, he turned and shot a question at Mrs. Borsden. "You're sure you didn't go back to the lodge?"

"No."

"How long were you there?"

"Half an hour."

"Think back. Think hard. Did you hear anything or see anything that might be helpful?"

SHE put her hand over her eyes. "No," she said hesitantly. "Nothing. Mrs. Peck was sitting in front of the fire, and the house was very quiet."

"Was she surprised at seeing you?"

"I think she had had too much to drink. She shrugged and said, 'Oh, it's you. Well, as long as you're here, you might as well sit down and tell me what the—the—hell you want.'"

"So you sat down."

"Yes. And she poured some liquor in a glass and I drank it."

"How long did you sit there before you hit her?"

"Ten or fifteen minutes. She kept saying cruel things about me and about Joe. She kept telling me I might as well go home, because Irene was going to get Rolfe."

"Finally you slapped her."

"Yes. I reached across the little table and hit her. Then her nose bled, and I helped her stop the blood." She frowned. "There was something: When I was standing by her, holding the ice on her neck, I heard something. I think it was a car."

"Don't you know?"

"I'm not sure. It was faint."

"Brakes squeaking? Tires on the gravel?"

"No. A motor."

"Was it the electric-light system going on?"

"The lights were on all the time. Electric lights."

"Sure," Humphrey said. "But Mrs. Peck made her own lights with a motor that automatically kept a bunch of batteries charged."

"Maybe that was what I heard. Anyway, when I went out a few minutes later, there was no car in the driveway. But"—she suddenly remembered something—"I saw a man."

"Know him?"

"No. He was a little man. I met him when I walked along the road to the gate. He—he had something in his hands. A package."

"Sweet," said Humphrey.

"Who?"

"Mrs. Peck's secretary. No wonder they got a confession out of Joe," Humphrey said. Robbie had finished phoning and was taking the things out of his hands.

"Let me," she told him. "You're making an awful mess." And with that she put the bag on the bed, emptied it and began neatly repacking. It didn't take long. Five minutes later they were in the hall.

"My car's up the block in front of a furniture store," Humphrey said. "A blue roadster. Pay the bill and meet me there. If anyone is hanging around the car, keep moving. I'll walk down."

The sun was gone, but the sky still held some light. He slipped through the back door, crossed a vacant lot went around the block and walked unhurriedly toward his car. The two women were in it. He slid in under the wheel, started the motor and pulled out into the deserted street. For two blocks he drove without speaking, casting a glance over his shoulder now and then. When he was sure no one was following, he expelled his breath in a long whistle of relief.

Robbie's shoulder was warm against his own. He was glad the car was an old model with a fairly narrow seat. Maybe this Borsden thing was just a phase with Robbie. Maybe she would get over it. After all, he hadn't played

his accordion for her yet. He said: "Do you like accordion music?"

Robbie turned her head, studied his face. "What?"

"Never mind." He knew he had interrupted a bit of thinking. "Here we are. Don't go in, Robbie. They may be watching the house."

"I haven't any clothes."

He pulled some bills from his pocket. "Buy a toothbrush at the first drugstore. Tomorrow you can pick up something in Morgantown. Get some jeans and a shirt, and tie a bandanna around your head. Mrs. Borsden, you're ill. You stay in the cabin. In bed, preferably. Tell the dame who runs the joint you're ailing." He opened the door for them, put the bags in Robbie's car.

She took his hand, squeezed it. "You're a nice guy, Mr.—Humphrey." She didn't wait for an answer, but shoved Mrs. Borsden into the car, got under the wheel, waved once and drove away. He stood there watching the car disappear into the gathering darkness, smiled wryly at the sky. A nice guy. Because he was helping Joe Borsden! Women, he thought. The ones you wanted for keeps didn't want you. The others— He sighed and climbed into his coupé.

The Mirador was a fine auto court. No questions asked. You drove in past the office with your hat down over your eyes, scrawled a name on a register, shelled out two dollars and a half and got a key. A door led from the garage into a cool, green-carpeted room with a double bed, a dresser, a low table, and a couple of comfortable chairs in it. There was a meter radio by the bed. If you put a quarter in it, it would play for two hours.

TAKING off his coat and tie, he stretched out on the bed with his hands behind his head, stared at the green ceiling, took his mind off Robbie and gave his attention to a much less pleasant subject—murder. Things were looking up. Not clear yet. Some light, though. But he had so many things to do and it was going to be tough to do them. People to talk to, and Hyatt on his tail wanting to heave him in the can. They couldn't hold him long. But they could keep him on ice long enough to wind up the Borsden case to their satisfaction. He knew now how they planned to wind it up, too. He got up presently, went out to the car and got his accordion from the rear deck. He was playing "Blue Skies" very softly when Chapman and Hilton knocked on the door.

Chapman had his fat brief-case. Hilton had his arms full of bundles.

"Hamburgers," said Hilton. "And Scotch and ice. I came prepared." He fished a quart of milk from one of the bags. "For you."

"Thanks," Humphrey said.

Humphrey drank half a glass of milk, launched an attack on a hamburger and asked: "Any luck?"

"Some," Hilton said. "Got the confession. Not much to it. No statements of witnesses. Talked to Anders about them, though."

Chapman snorted. "Luck! Did you know what a jam you're in?"

"I have a rough idea," said Humphrey.

"Tell him, Hilton," Chapman growled.

"They seem to think you were very busy at the lodge yesterday morning." Hilton found amusement in the whole business. "Destroying evidence—using a hose to wash footprints away. So there's a warrant out. They've got Oscar over at the D.A.'s office now, asking him questions. Futile—he's cockeyed. Or pretending to be. They had cops at the Bakersfield station to grab you when you changed to the bus, only they were ten minutes too late. So the L.A. cops are waiting for you in Hollywood."

"Maybe they'll figure I stopped off in Bakersfield," said Humphrey.

"And maybe they won't," said Chapman. "Look here: you better go in and explain."

"That can wait. I don't like the looks of that jail. Let's see what Borsden had to say."

Hilton took a paper from his pocket, tossed it in Humphrey's lap. Borsden seemed to believe in conciseness:

I wish, of my own free will, to confess to the murder of Mrs. Gertrude Peck.

My motive for the crime is known to the authorities. There is no necessity to record it here. I killed her for what I felt was sufficient reason and am willing to take the consequences.

The crime was premeditated. At five o'clock on the morning of April 28 I paddled from my barge to the boat-landing below the Peck lodge, hid my kayak in the willows and made my way to the woodshed. There I remained in hiding until Mrs. Peck arose. I am not sure of the time, but I think it was a little after six o'clock. When she came out to the woodshed, I murdered her, using as a weapon an ax I found leaning against the wall. I disrobed her, carried the body to the boathouse, stuffed it under the seat of the rowboat and turned the boat over. The boat I towed well out into the stream and set adrift. I then paddled back to my barge, changed my clothing, and burned that which I had worn.

His name was scrawled at the bottom.

"Unimaginative," observed Hilton. "But to the point."

"Imaginative, rather," Humphrey disagreed. "Observe the lack of detail. No explanation of why Mrs. Peck went to the woodshed. Nothing about burying her clothes."

"You did that," said Hilton brightly.

"Me?"

"Oh, yes. Anders told me. Anders asked Borsden what he did with the clothes, and he said he shoved them under a pile of wood in the shed. And Borsden said nothing about washing off the pier, so they've pinned that on you too."

"Does Anders believe him?"

"He says so."

"He's a liar," Humphrey said. "So's Hyatt. They charged him yet?"

"Not yet. Hyatt says he's drawing up a murder complaint."

"Against Joe?"

"He didn't say. Just said he was getting a complaint ready." He blinked behind his heavy glasses. "When you think it over, it looks phony. The *News*—they carefully avoided any mention of a murder charge against Borsden. Announced he had confessed and was in jail. Filled the rest of the paper with glowing tributes to Mrs. Peck and Hyatt and Anders. Ran a detailed story of Borsden's life."

"They mention how he lost his hand?"

"No," said Hilton. "But my paper will."

"Anders hint that they were looking for anyone?"

"Nope. Are they?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," said Humphrey, and he told about Mrs. Borsden and about her story.

Chapman looked sick. He said: "What are you trying to do? Get yourself locked up for good? Don't you see?"

"That Mrs. Borsden looks guilty? Sure."

"Maybe she is. And you've got that girl with her."

Hilton had his hands locked around his knees. He rocked back and forth and chanted: "Mrs. Borsden took an ax, gave her son's mother-in-law forty whacks."

"Please, Max!" said Humphrey. "That rhyme has haunted me, and I've been trying to shake it. Don't worry about the girl. Even if Mrs. Borsden stooped to murder, she wouldn't do it again. No reason, this time. She isn't a fiend."

"Oh, my God," said Chapman.

"Maybe she's guilty," said Humphrey. "And maybe Joe is guilty. Maybe he is trying to lead us to believe that his confession is a phony. I'm taking all that into consideration. But Borsden hasn't fired me, and until he does, I'll go on working. What else did you get out of Anders?"

"Not a bad guy," Hilton admitted grudgingly, "for a cop. Admitted, in confidence, mind you, what Joe's motive was. The hand, the custody business. They've questioned everyone but Irene Peck—Skeel, Otis, Beaumont, Price, Swett. Anders wouldn't let me in on what they had to say. Told me they were pretty well in the clear. None of them was around the lodge at six yesterday."

Hilton dug into his coat pocket. "Here's a note from Oscar, passed on by a rather tipsy chief of police." He handed Humphrey a sealed envelope. Inside was a very dirty drink price-list from the City Hall rendezvous. The message was scrawled on the back.

"Comparatively sober," Oscar had written. "*Spies say Frank and Honest out all Monday night. XX word dropped. Not news. Keep punching.*"

He put the card in his pocket, picked up another hamburger. "What did Anders say about fingerprints?"

"Waxed mysterious. Would say naught."

"Probably doesn't trust you too much. This is the situation as I see it: They know Mrs. Borsden was out at the lodge. So they drop Joe a hint she is around. Joe confesses, and they give out the confession to smoke her out."

"Now look here," said Chapman. "If that's how it is, there's only one way to handle it. You believe Mrs. Borsden and her son innocent. Then take the matter to court. Deliver her to the district attorney and let a jury decide."

"While I languish in the county jail? I'd rather play it my way."

"And what will that get you?"

"Freedom to pursue my chosen profession," said Humphrey. "I want to prove who murdered Mrs. Peck, and I can't do it with the law on my heels. Come on, Max."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



HE home of the mayor of Joaquin was no humble affair. There was a park around it; and set in the sweep of lawn was a swimming-pool big enough to accommodate fifty of the taxpayers who had helped pay for it.

It was a gracious Spanish colonial structure, long, two-storied, faced with colored tile. The mayor's salary was six thousand dollars a year. Even an amateur at property values could tell the house cost a hundred thousand.

"The wages of civic virtue," Max Hilton said as they crossed the lawn.

They went up the broad steps together, stopped in front of a pale blue door. Humphrey nudged the bell a couple of times. A well-ted man in tails opened the door, gave them the fish eye. He looked like a fellow off a beer-truck, but spoke like a gentleman.

"Journalists from the *San Francisco Recorder*," said Humphrey. "On an important mission."

"A moment." The butler was unimpressed.

But if the butler didn't think much of newspaper men, T. Elliot Price did. They were led down a hall, across a living-room you could play football in, and into what could be mistaken for nothing but a library. Price stood by the fireplace, a sleek figure in blue slacks and a blue gaucho shirt. In one hand he had a fat book, and his finger was shoved down in it to mark the place.

When he saw Humphrey, the smile died. He snapped: "I thought—"

"He is," Humphrey nodded at Hilton. "Genuine, with documents to prove it."

"What do you want?" The tone was suspicious. "I'm busy."

Hilton produced his guild card, held it in front of Price. "We're using the Morgan-Campbell office. That's why Mr. Campbell is here."

A bit of a smile appeared on Price's face. "Drink?"

"Thanks, no."

Price waved at a collection of things to sit on. The two men sat. The Mayor kept his place on the hearth.

"It's about the *News*—the paper in Joaquin," Hilton said. "What about it?"

"The *News* is going to switch back to Beaumont," Hilton said. "Just as suddenly as it switched over to you Monday."

Price pulled one eyebrow down.

"What's this all about? Why are you concerned over who the *News* supports?"

"Tell him," Hilton said.

"I've been employed by the *Recorder* to investigate the murder of Gertrude Peck," said Humphrey.

"Yah," Price snapped. "What of it? What has that to do with me?"

"Nothing directly. A good deal indirectly. It may cost you the election. You know a man named Swett?"

"Of course. Mrs. Peck's secretary."

"This afternoon he was given notice," Humphrey lied. "Tonight the *Recorder* purchased his story."

PRICE was nervous; he sat down to try to hide the fact. "Naturally, he had Mrs. Peck's confidence." Humphrey paused.

"Go on. Go on!"

"Until this election you have always had the extremely powerful support of the *News*," said Humphrey. "Right?"

Price didn't answer. He tried glowering.

"Until Monday, Beaumont was Mrs. Peck's fair-haired boy," said Humphrey. "Then she changed her mind. Gave orders to switch back to you. Between editions, Mr. Price. Of course you noticed it."

Price waited. He had a cigarette in his mouth now, and momentarily hid his eyes behind the match-flame.

"Sometime after eleven o'clock Monday night, Mrs. Peck was brutally hacked to death with an ax." Humphrey spaced the words, and that made it sound pretty horrible.

"Six Tuesday morning," Price corrected.

"Monday," said Humphrey, "you paid Mrs. Peck a visit. Immediately thereafter the paper switched over."

"You're not—"

"Saying you were implicated in the murder? Quite the contrary. What I'm saying is this: You persuaded Mrs. Peck to change her mind. Then Mrs. Peck was removed from the scene. Her daughter now controls the policies of the *News*. And her daughter is going to marry Don Skeel. Mr. Skeel is not on your side."

Price got it. His face said he got its full significance. "Now, take the *Recorder*," said Humphrey: "It has a big circulation in Joaquin—not as big as the *News*, but big. Suppose the *Recorder* published the material you gave Mrs. Peck that caused such an obvious change of horses."

Price didn't rise for the lure.

"I know where that material is. Irene Peck has it, or rather the photostat of it," said Humphrey. "The *News* won't print it, naturally. But you have the original. And the *Recorder*—" He waved his hand.

Price found composure. He had the game figured out now. "You're guessing, Campbell."

"I'm giving you A-plus for intelligence, Mr. Price. That you put the heat on Mrs. Peck isn't guesswork. Swett." He seemed to enjoy the name. "A man who has kept on top of the political heap as long as you have doesn't hand over originals."

Price stood up, went back to the hearth, shoved his hands in his pockets. "What's the proposition?"

"We're not making propositions," said Humphrey. "We're trying to solve a murder case."

"It's solved." He jerked his hand toward the paper spread out on the coffee-table. Black headlines shouted Joe Borsden's name.

"You believe that?"

"Don't you?"

"No," said Humphrey.

The Mayor rubbed his jaw; there was curiosity in the glance he gave the detective.

"The Hyatt machine is strong, isn't it?" Humphrey asked.

Price nodded.

"Stronger, now that Allison Jones is part of it."

The Mayor's shrewd eyes got cold.

"Strong enough so that with the proper break, Hyatt's boy Beaumont will move into your seat," said Humphrey. "Suppose tomorrow Hyatt announces an arrest in the Peck case? Suppose he appoints Beaumont as special prosecutor, and then the *News* follows up with a rip-roaring editorial saying Beaumont is the man to lead the citizens out of Egypt?"

"Boys," said Price, in a tone that took them into his camp, "is this on the level?"

"What do you think, Mr. Price?"

"I can bust those fellows wide open."

"That," said Humphrey, "is what I figured, unless—have they got anything on you?"

"What could they have on me?"

"Jones," said Humphrey. "He's on the other team now. Pitching."

Price summoned up dignity and a pious look. "See here, Campbell—"

"We're weaned," said Humphrey. "Long since. We may hope and pray for a political Utopia, and in time we may do something to make one possible. But at the moment we are forced, by circumstance in the form of Mr. Hyatt, to be materialists. Our job is to solve a murder, and nothing else. You can help us solve it and keep your job."

Price smiled crookedly. "Lay 'em face up. You're in a jam. I know it. I talked to Shelbourne awhile ago."

"Not a jam. An inconvenient situation. They want to put me in the can. They won't keep me there, because I've done nothing particularly unlawful. But they can keep me there long enough to work up a good murder case and swing an election. All they need is six days. The election's next Tuesday. They can sew me up until then. After that, it doesn't matter."

ELLIOTT PRICE nodded thoughtfully. "Your hand beats mine. All right. Jones doesn't dare shoot his face off."

"Why did he switch?"

"It doesn't matter, does it?"

"Just curious," said Humphrey.

"That's a bad habit. You know what this election means to me. I've been in politics too long to try my hand at anything else. I keep Joaquin moderately clean and orderly. The tax-rate isn't too high. The water and light department makes dough, and we don't steal it. We keep the streets paved and the crime-rate low."

"And you have a fine fire department," Humphrey added. He wished Oscar was on hand. Oscar would love T. Elliot Price's philosophy. "Those dopes!" Oscar had said about the citizenry.

Price laughed. "All right. We have a fine fire department. Now what do you want?"

"The low-down on why the *News* changed its mind."

"Has that something to do with the murder?"

"Something."

"Will the *Recorder* print it?"

"We won't promise."

"Then what do I get out of it?"

"The assurance that the *News* will not support Beaumont—the possibility that Beaumont will withdraw as a candidate."

"So I give you the dope, and you use it to get the boys off your neck."

"I use it to solve a murder."

"I'm not interested in solving murders."

"If Shelbourne got the credit, would you be interested? Shelbourne's your man."

"That's something else. How sure are you?"

Humphrey shrugged. "One's never sure of anything. I think I know who killed her. I've got to prove it. I do, and your boys get the credit; then the *News* can't support Beaumont very well. Not when Mrs. Peck was the publisher."

Price didn't speak. He moved quickly to one of the bookshelves, ran his hand along the molding, swung a section out. There was a safe behind the volumes. He spun a dial a few times, opened the door, pulled out a packet of papers, selected two from the bundle, closed the safe and swung the books back. He dropped the papers in Humphrey's lap. One was an original of a letter, the other a photostat.

"That," he said, "came from Beaumont's office, as you'll see by the attached envelope. You can draw your own conclusions as to how we got it."

"I've seen her," said Humphrey. "I didn't think she'd sell out. She looks so virginal."

"You know what they say about people," Price said.

Humphrey shook his head sadly and read the letter. It wasn't typewritten. The writer had a round, fine hand.

Dear Frank:

It's in the bag. She was plenty tough, but that's not unusual. Four days before election, she'll give Price the works.

You understand my silence. I haven't dared call you or see you. They've got the eye on you, and your phone is probably tapped. Thank God, the Government is tough about tampering with the U. S. mail.

She kept us dangling a hell of a long time, though it's evident from the way she handled the business, she planned to give in. She has to—what with the boys who hold the mortgage getting nasty! That was a master-stroke, my friend, lining them up. Nevertheless, she knows that while we have her, she has us too, and wants plenty. It's worth it. The way the paper goes means the election.

I'm going to Los Angeles on the 29th. Have Jones meet me there, and I'll give him the bad news. Pass the word on to Hyatt. I know he's anxious.

Don.

"What a bright boy Mr. Skeel is!" said Humphrey, handing the letter to Hilton.

"How was he to know we had Beaumont's maid and his secretary on our payroll?" said Price. "Why, they had been with Beaumont for years." He chuckled, and it wasn't a nice sound.

"The postal inspectors—" Humphrey suggested.

"We didn't open the letter," Price said. "His secretary did, and that's her job. All we did was buy it from her. Is that tampering with the mails?" Again he chuckled.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



CHARLES HYATT had on white lounging pajamas cut Russian style, which would probably have annoyed his constituents, who loved to hear him talk about the Red menace. When he saw Humphrey right behind Max Hilton, his mouth dropped open and he grabbed for the telephone.

"Hold it," Humphrey said. "I've decided to run from the law no more."

Hyatt kept his hand on the phone.

"Anyway," said Humphrey, making himself comfortable in a chair whose cushions had taken the down from a whole flock of geese, "I don't think you want to arrest me. Or you won't, after you hear our song."

"I told you," Hyatt growled.

"You're not in a position to tell me anything any more. Is Oscar in the can?"

Hyatt let go of the phone. Curiosity, puzzlement and anger chased each other across his rugged face.

"Read that," said Humphrey, flipping the photostat of Don Skeel's letter at Hyatt. "Then we'll confer."

The photostat fell at Hyatt's slippers feet. They were Russian slippers—blue with high tops. He scowled at it, put out his hand and retrieved it gingerly.

"That's right," said Humphrey. "It's dynamite."

It was, so far as Hyatt was concerned. Red showed under the tan. The veins on his temples stood out. He asked huskily: "Where did you get this?"

"The names are familiar?"

He started to speak, checked himself, swallowed, said: "What are you trying to pull off? Bringing junk like this to me!"

"Frank and Honest," said Humphrey. "He never got a chance to read the letter. He knows it was sent, and he's very worried. So is Mr. Jones. They know it found its way into the hands of Mrs. Peck just before she was murdered. We're not pulling anything, Mr. Hyatt. You got tough with us, and we're getting tough with you. Hilton, here, has the original of that letter safely stowed away. Unless you want to deal, it goes into the *Recorder* tomorrow."

"It's a fake," Hyatt sneered, but the sneer lacked vitality.

"Mrs. Peck didn't think so. Neither did her daughter Irene, or Allison Jones or Frank Beaumont. Or T. Elliot Price. They all took it at its face value. I've come to confess. I was in the lodge yesterday morning, and that's how I found out about Skeel's letter. But I destroyed no evidence, buried no garments and hosed off no piers. I don't like guys following me. Want to hear the proposition?"

Hyatt considered. The veins stood out even more, and there was anger in his pale blue eyes, the anger that comes when you know someone has you hooked.

"Take your time," said Humphrey. "The last edition of the *Recorder* doesn't go to press until seven in the morning."

"What is it?" He was sullen, defeated.

"Call off the dogs. Then haul in all your witnesses and let me talk to them."

"What good will it do for you to talk to them?"

"Does it matter?"

Hyatt shrugged.

"Now will you play with us?" When Hyatt didn't answer, Humphrey went on: "Yes, I know what it means. You'll have to let Beaumont swim for himself. Maybe you'll have to drown him—you should, for being so dumb. Making deals with guys like Skeel! Yes, Skeel. Not Mrs. Peck—whatever her sins, one of them wasn't taking cuts from rackets. That's obvious from what happened."

Hyatt dropped his left eyelid. "You're not telling me Skeel murdered Mrs. Peck?"

"I didn't say that. Mrs. Peck saw this letter, and immediately swung back to Price."

"All these people have been cleared," growled Hyatt. "I'm damned if I'll drag them in for an amateur."

Humphrey stood up. "Come on, Max."

"Wait," Hyatt said, and his tone had panic in it as he picked up the phone. "You want all of them?"

"All of them except Irene Peck," said Humphrey. "Even Mr. Swett." Hyatt began to telephone. . . .

Beaumont arrived first, without escort. His eyes were red-rimmed; he looked old, tired and scared.

Hyatt treated him with cold contempt. "Sit down," he snapped. They were in his redwood-paneled study that sported a moth-eaten moose head with a rusty gun in its antlers.

"Hello, Charles," Beaumont said meekly. He gulped a couple of times. "You wouldn't have a drink around, would you?"

"Later," Hyatt said.

Beaumont squinted at Humphrey, wet his lips. "This is Max Hilton, of the *Recorder*," Humphrey said.

Beaumont acknowledged the introduction with a weak nod. "What's the matter, Charles?" he wanted to know.

"Nothing," said Hyatt sardonically. "Not a thing! Mr. Campbell, here, has been kind enough to agree to help on the Peck case, that's all."

"Oh," said Beaumont. He slumped.

"This is yours," Humphrey put the photostat in Beaumont's pudgy hands. "A bit late. It will explain why Mr. Hyatt accepted my offer of help."

Beaumont's hands shook; he swallowed, tried to find a laugh. What he dug up was pretty hollow. "You don't—"

"Shut up," said Hyatt. "Campbell wants to ask some questions. Answer them."

"Truthfully," Humphrey suggested.

Beaumont put his head in his hands. "I'd like a drink," he said in a muffled voice.

Hyatt rose, opened a cupboard, took out a bottle and some glasses, put them on the coffee-table. Beaumont spilled a stiff shot in a glass and drank it.

"We'll start with Monday morning," Humphrey said. "Did you see Mrs. Peck first, or did Price?"

"I did."

"What went on?"

"Nothing much. We discussed the campaign."

"Mrs. Peck didn't know about this letter then?"

Beaumont sought help from Hyatt, got none. "No."

"Go on," Humphrey urged. "What did you do? The works."

He heaved a deep sigh. "I went out to the club and played nine holes. When I got back to town, the second edition of the *News* was out. Announcing the paper would support Price."

"Did you call Mrs. Peck then?"

"Yes. I asked if she would see me, and she said no. I said I could explain everything, and finally she told me she was busy then, but would be at the lodge—for me to come there after six."

"What time did you get there?"

"About seven. I'm not sure."

"Was she alone?"

"No. Her daughter and Don Skeel were there."

"Did you get a chance to speak to Skeel alone?"

"No."

"How was Mrs. Peck behaving toward Skeel? Did you notice?"

"She seemed angry with him. When I got to the front door of the lodge, they were all talking pretty loud."

"Could you make out anything that was said?"

"Mrs. Peck was swearing, mostly."

"Then what?"

"I went in, and the daughter and Skeel left."

"How long were you there?"

"Maybe an hour. I don't know."

"Was the subject of this letter brought up?"

Again Beaumont sought help from Hyatt, got nothing but a dirty look. "Yes."

"What did she have to say about Skeel?"

"She—she had fired him."

"I can guess what else she said," Humphrey observed. "Anyone show up while you were there?"

"No."

"After you left, where did you go?"

"Home."

"Your house was being watched by the city cops. They tell a different story."

Beaumont shakily poured another drink. "Look—it doesn't matter where I went."

"Doesn't it? Remember, Mrs. Peck was murdered Monday night or Tuesday morning."

"Tuesday morning at six," interposed Hyatt.

"I didn't kill her," Beaumont whined.

"Where did you go?"

"All right, I didn't go home. I called Skeel. He wasn't in. Then I called a friend. Went to his place."

"Come on," Humphrey snapped. "Allison Jones?"

"Yes," Beaumont admitted.

"You told him about the letter?"

Beaumont nodded.

"How long did you stay?"

"An hour."

"Then where?"

"Is that—the *Recorder*—"

"There'll be no need to print it," Humphrey comforted. "Because if you can prove where you were until you showed in your office Tuesday, you won't be news—except when you withdraw your candidacy. Anyway, Max isn't going to print this. So go on."

"I called my wife," Beaumont said. "Told her I had to go to San Francisco. Then I—well, I went to a place I know and spent the night there."

"What's her name?"

"No," he pleaded.

"They don't put you in the gas chamber for that," said Humphrey.

Beaumont pushed all the breath out of his lungs. "All right. She works for Jones. I only know her first name—Flo. We went to an auto court just outside Colby Junction. Registered as Mr. and Mrs. Workman."

Humphrey nodded to Hyatt. "You might check that."

"He's telling the truth," Hyatt said sullenly.

"That's all," said Humphrey. "Good night, Mr. Beaumont. Shall we say ill health or business, when we announce you've decided not to run?"

"Oh, my God!" said Beaumont and poured another drink.

"Business," said Hyatt laconically.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

MARY OTIS was angry. For two days she had been harassed by the law, had been kept a virtual prisoner in her hotel room, had been forced to make most of the arrangements for the Arkelian tour of the valley by telephone. She stalked in, breathing fire and smoke, saw Humphrey standing there and stopped short. "Good evening," said Humphrey.

"You too?"

"No," said Humphrey. "I'm helping Mr. Hyatt."

"This is outrageous," she snapped. "I've work to do. Is it necessary to deprive me of my nights as well as my days?"

"It won't take long," said Humphrey. "Just a few questions."

"And who do you think you are?"

"Miss Otis," said Hyatt grudgingly, "Mr. Campbell has been called in on this murder investigation. Please be kind enough to submit to further questioning."

She flung herself on the couch, hurled her cigarette at the hearth. "And who is this man?" She indicated Hilton.

"My assistant," said Humphrey.

"What do you want to know?"

"Why you went to see Mrs. Peck Monday night."

"There's no mystery about it. I went to arrange for publicity for Arkelian."

Humphrey's voice was cold.

"Why didn't you tell me that Tuesday?"

"Why should I have told you anything?"

"You knew I was working for Joe Borsden."

Hyatt took pity on her. He said: "Now see here, Campbell. We've eliminated Miss Otis. Her car did not leave the hotel garage Monday night or Tuesday morning. At the time the murder was committed, she was in her room—definitely in her room."

"You've eliminated her—I haven't," said Humphrey. "If you want my help, let me handle this." The grin he gave Hyatt wasn't nice.

Hyatt scowled, indicated with a gesture that he did want Campbell's help.

"It was none of your business what I did," snapped Miss Otis. "I didn't like your attitude or your insinuations. Yes, insinuations—that I was mixed into this murder."

"Then the sole reason for your visit to the lodge was to discuss publicity with Mrs. Peck?"

"Right."

"You didn't mention Joe Borsden?"

"No. I had seen Joe. A matter was cleared up. I understood, at last, why he had not communicated with me. I sympathized, certainly. But—" She shrugged. "He didn't want sympathy, nor pity. He seemed perfectly happy. I had Arkelian to think about."

"You believed Joe's story about how he lost his hand?"

"Why not?" She shot a glance at him. "That's the second time you've asked that. What's the mystery, Mr. Campbell?"

Humphrey countered with another question. "Did you go into the kitchen?"

"There was a momentary hesitation. "Yes," she admitted. "I helped Mrs. Peck fill a bowl with ice."

"Did you notice what sort of a stove she had?"

Her eyes narrowed. She seemed wary. "Stove?"

"Yes."

"I don't—yes, I do. Wood. I remember commenting on it. I have one much like it in my cabin in the Adirondacks. But what does the stove matter?"

"We have a problem, Miss Otis. Mrs. Peck was murdered in the woodshed. How did the murderer get her out there?"

"So that's why you wanted to know if I noticed the stovel Clever, Campbell. Of course. A woodshed has wood in it. So Tuesday morning I went out there and waited until Mrs. Peck came out for wood. Oh, no. I was in the hotel Tuesday morning."

Humphrey ignored her outburst. "The only other reason to visit the woodshed at the lodge is the light plant," he said. "If it goes out of whack."

"Light plant," said Miss Otis. "I thought—yes, you're right—I heard a motor go on when I was in the kitchen."

"Only, you don't go out and fuss with light plants in the morning," Humphrey continued. "Not if your ice-box is one of those that burns kerosene, and your stove is a wood-burner, and there's no electric toaster or electric coffee maker."

Hyatt said: "You're an observant fellow." He was, for the first time, respectful. "Then there could be only one reason Mrs. Peck went to the woodshed—unless she was attacked in the house, stunned and carried to the shed."

"There was no evidence of a struggle in the lodge, Mr. Hyatt."

"No," he admitted. "There wasn't."

Miss Otis cut in: "Couldn't you speculate some other time? I'd like to go to bed."

"Sorry," said Humphrey. "I guess that's all."

IF the apple-checked Don Skeel was frightened, he didn't show it. He gave them one of his boyish smiles, eyed Humphrey and Hilton curiously, greeted Hyatt affectionately as Charles, and sat down. But it took no time at all to put the fear of God in Mr. Skeel. The photostat of his letter did it. It left him gulping, shattered.

"Takes a bit of explaining, doesn't it?" Humphrey observed.

"You can't—" said Skeel, and stopped.

"Prove its authenticity? Now, now," said Humphrey. "Let's not be childish. We know you wrote it, and who it went to."

Skeel bent his head and clenched his hands. He found defiance presently. He said: "All right. I wrote it. I wanted nothing to do with the whole business from the start. But I was working for Mrs. Peck. You see what a spot I was in. Someone had to be her agent in that deal."

"What a louse you are!" Humphrey said.

"Now, look here—" Skeel made his hands into fists.

"Look where?" said Humphrey. He wished Skeel would make a pass. He hadn't hit anyone for a long time, and it seemed to him Skeel was a fit subject for practice. "Mrs. Peck fired you last Monday. Does that signify anything?"

THE wind went out of him. Some of the color left his cheeks.

"The deal was your idea, wasn't it?" Humphrey insisted.

"Yes," he replied feebly.

"And you were to get the cut from Jones—not Mrs. Peck?"

"Yes."

"The only reason Mrs. Peck gave in about Beaumont was your persuasive tongue, and pressure from the boys who hold the mortgage. Right?"

"Yes."

"Let's go back to Monday. What time were you fired?"

"After lunch."

"How did you explain it to Irene?"

"I told her that we had a row—her mother and I."

"It was Irene who suggested you go out and talk it over?"

Skeel nodded.

"Did Mrs. Peck tell her daughter about the letter?"

"Yes."

"Did she show it to her?"

"No. Just mentioned she had received one. Said that's why she fired me. Said if Irene wanted to know what was in it, she could ask me."

"After you left the lodge, where did you go?"

"To a bar."

"Alone?"

"No. With Irene."

"How long were you there?"

"Until it closed. I guess that's at two."

"Then what?"

"I took Irene home and sat outside a little while talking. Then I went home too."

"Anyone see you?"

"The night-clerk at my hotel."

"Where do you park your car there?"

"In the basement garage."

"Then how does it happen the night-clerk saw you?"

"I stopped at the desk on my way up to see if there was any mail."

"You didn't go out again?"

Skeel raised sullen eyes. "If you're saying I drove out to the lodge and killed Mrs. Peck, you're wrong. I didn't. I went to bed. Didn't leave my room until ten next morning."

"You could have left it without being seen?"

"Yes. But I didn't."

"Have you fixed things up with Irene?"

Skeel dug up anger. "That's none of your business."

"I suppose it isn't," Humphrey admitted. "Anyway, I know the answer. Irene had a copy of that letter, Skeel. Did you know that?"

"Yes, I knew that," he snapped.

"Have you been to the lodge often?"

"Yes. Quite a lot."

"You should know a good deal about Mrs. Peck's habits, then. What time did she usually get up?"

"The times I was there it was around six—six-thirty."

"Did she get her breakfast there, or eat in town?"

"I don't know what she did every time she stayed there. When I was there,—and I've spent the night there not more than a dozen times,—we had breakfast at the lodge."

"She cooked it?"

"Yes. She liked to cook."

"I suppose you hauled in wood and kindling for her."

"Naturally—if any was needed."

"Do you know how that light plant works?"

"I know little about it."

"You know there is a light plant at the lodge?"

"Certainly. I was there when they put the new one in a couple of months ago. An automatic. The old one wasn't."

"Thank you," said Humphrey. "That's all."

There was a smug smile on Hyatt's face as Skeel left the room. "Want to borrow a pair of handcuffs?" he asked. "Not yet," said Humphrey. "Let's talk to Mr. Swett first."

Edmund Swett might be little and rabbitty, but he knew how to keep his nervous system in control. He looked at the three men sitting in the study and didn't bat an eye as he sat down, and said primly: "Yes, gentlemen?"

The phone interrupted Humphrey's first question. Hyatt picked it up, growled into the mouthpiece. The rasp of a thin voice cut through the silence of the room. A smile spread across his face. He put the receiver back on the hook and said: "All right, Campbell. Go on."

"Good news?" asked Humphrey.

"Expected news," said Hyatt.

"Borsden decided to save the county the expense of a trial by committing suicide?" asked Humphrey.

"Nothing like that," said Hyatt. "Would you mind getting on with this? I've important things to do."

"Not at all," said Humphrey. He looked at Swett, asked: "Why did you go to the lodge Monday night?"

"Business," said Swett, shooting a glance at Hyatt.

"Explain to him we're working together," suggested Humphrey.

"Tell him anything he wants to know," said Hyatt tolerantly. "Anything, Ed."

Swett's nod said he understood the situation. "Mrs. Peck sent for me—to bring her some papers."

"What were the papers?"

"I can't divulge that."

"What time did you arrive?"

"Between ten and eleven."

"Anyone with Mrs. Peck then?"

"No."

"See anyone near the lodge?"

"There was a car parked at the gate with a man in it. As I walked to the lodge—the gate was locked and I had no key—I met a woman."

"Know her?"

"No," said Swett.

"What did you do at the lodge?"

"Gave Mrs. Peck the material she had requested."

"In what condition was she?"

"She had been drinking, but she wasn't intoxicated."

"What did you do while you were there? Just sit around and talk?"

"Well—yes, I guess that's about it."

"Don't guess. Tell me exactly what you did."

"All right," snapped Swett. "I got Mrs. Peck two aspirin tablets. Then I made her a bromo-seltzer."

"You went into the kitchen?"

"Twice. Once to make a bromo. The second time to make sure there was wood and kindling for the morning fire."

"Was there?"

"There was."

"What then?"

"I went home."

"Do you think Mrs. Peck was expecting another visitor?"

"She didn't say. I gave the matter no thought."

"So you went home," said Humphrey. "You live alone?"

"I do."

"No one saw you, then?"

"No. I went to my apartment, read for a short while."

"What time did you leave your apartment Tuesday morning?"

"At eight—my usual time."

"Why,"—Humphrey gave him a sinister look—"were you worried about Mrs. Peck Tuesday morning?"

Swett didn't hesitate. "She failed to appear for an appointment."

"No other reason to worry?"

He lost some of his composure. "I—well—" His eyes sought help from Hyatt, seemed to be asking if the law had the finger on him.

"You were the one who insisted they examine the body found later that day. Right?"

Swett took a deep breath. "I was—yes. But—" He slumped a little.

"That's enough," growled Hyatt. "Mr. Swett, there's no reason to be frightened. You are absolutely in the clear in this."

Relief swept over the little man. He sighed.

"And you can run along," said Hyatt. "This has gone far enough. We've wasted too much time. We know who killed Mrs. Peck, Campbell." He let that sink in, grinning his triumph. "We have her under arrest. Picked her up in an auto court at Morgantown a little while ago."

Humphrey waited, and things were happening to his stomach. They must have Robbie too, then.

"Her name," crowed Hyatt, "is Mrs. Josephine Borsden. What do you think of that?"

"I don't know what to think," Humphrey admitted. "Was she—alone?" He sort of dropped that last word.

"All by herself," said Hyatt. Humphrey didn't like the look the district attorney shot at him, wished he had kept his mouth shut.

"I guess that's that," Humphrey said. "Coming, Max?"

"Not me," said Hilton. "I've work to do."

"Good night," said Humphrey, and went out. And now he had another thing to worry about. What had happened to Robbie Vance?

CHAPTER NINETEEN

 NOTHING had happened to Robbie. From Hyatt's he drove to his apartment, knowing that would be the first place she would head for. And she was waiting in her car, parked in the shadow of the sycamore across the street; and when he pulled up, she called to him softly. He went over and got into her car.

She had been crying, you could see. And he saw, with some satisfaction, that she was one of those women who could cry and look none the worse for it. "I'm so sorry," Robbie said.

"Forget it. What happened?"

"She wanted some aspirin. I went for it. When I drove up in back of the cabin, I heard men talking. I looked in, and the place was full of them, and they were putting her things in the suitcase. I came right here."

"Smart girl! I hope she keeps her mouth shut."

"I told her to," Robbie said. "Before I left, I told her if anything happened, not to talk at all. I shouldn't have gone."

"Thank God you did! They'd have you too," said Humphrey. "That would be fine."

"Will they—"

"They have," said Humphrey. "She's in jail, and they're drawing up a murder complaint if one isn't already drawn. Look," he said. "We've got work to do. You wait here. I'll be back in a couple of minutes with a man's-sized chore."

He ran across the street, let himself into the apartment building and went up the steps two at a time. He slid his gun out of its shoulder holster, opened his door, but didn't go in at once. Instead he reached in and switched on the light. No one was waiting for him.

On the desk was the phone, and under it was the book. He opened the book to the classified, ran his finger down the yellow pages until he found what he sought, then began jotting down names and addresses. He made two lists, and

when he was through, scribbled a note on top of one of the lists, and hurried out.

Robbie took the paper he gave her, and her eyes were bright with excitement.

"You go to those addresses," Humphrey explained. "Ask the guy on duty if a person answering that description came in last Monday night. It shouldn't take more than half an hour. Say three-quarters. Meet me by the fountain in the courthouse park." He glanced at his watch. "At eleven, or as near eleven as you can."

Robbie nodded. She held the paper under the dash-lamp, read what he had written, shot a questioning glance at him. But all she said was: "I'll be there."

"Good. See you then." He was going to call her *sprite*—Joe Borsden seemed to get good results with the word. But he didn't. He took his foot from the running-board, patted her arm, and sent a warm smile after her when she drove away. . . .

She was there by the fountain when he came out of the county jail at eleven o'clock, and he didn't have to ask if she had been successful. Her sober face told him the answer.

"No luck," Robbie said.

"Nor I," Humphrey admitted. Doubt assailed him. Maybe his theory was based on an error in reasoning. But no, it couldn't be. The complexity of the crime pointed to one person. Elaborate. Too damned elaborate, that was it. Robbie's voice pushed past his thoughts.

"I went to all the places on the list," she said. "Two of them I'll have to go back to. The men who worked on Monday were off."

There was still hope, then. "Get their names?"

"And home phone-numbers," said Robbie. She put in his hand the list he had given her. "I've written them on this."

"For that, I could kiss you," Humphrey said. And for other reasons, he thought. For a good many other reasons. He smiled down at her, thinking how fine it would be to stand here in the moonlight holding her close to him. Moonlight on her face. Her lips parted just a little. Such lovely lips—full, yet not too full. Now she was smiling, and there were stars in her eyes.

"Robbie—" he whispered.

BUT footsteps on the pavement stopped him. Those stars were not for him. She wasn't listening. He dropped his hands and turned, saw Joe Borsden coming toward them.

"Joe," Robbie cried, and ran to him, took both his hands and held them. "Oh, Joe! That was why Mr. Campbell was at the jail. I should have guessed."

Joe smiled, squeezed her hands. "Hello, *sprite*."

"It will be all right," Robbie said. "Mr. Campbell is sure it will be all right."

Joe nodded. "Of course, she didn't do it. I know now she didn't do it. For a little while I was a fool."

"So was I," said Humphrey.

"You?" Robbie turned toward him, but she didn't let Joe's hands go. "How, Mr. Campbell?"

Humphrey's answer was a grin. He waved and left them standing there.

From the corner, he looked back. They were still standing close together in the moonlight. So be it, he thought, and headed for the beer parlor in the shadow of the city hall. Oscar wasn't there, but a slew of cops were, shoved up to the bar. A fine lot! He shouldered his way through the mess of bluecoats to the phone-booth in the rear, shut himself in, dialed the first of the numbers Robbie had written on the paper. Was Antonio Fante in? Yes, this was Antonio Fante, and what the hell was the idea of getting a man out of bed this time of night? Humphrey explained. The Department of Justice could not wait for Mr. Fante to arise. Mr. Fante became a little more respectful, so Humphrey asked his question.

"Nope," said Mr. Fante. "Nobody like that come in. Nobody come in at all."

"I thank you," said Humphrey. "And the Government thanks you." He hung up and tried the other number. This time a woman with a very sweet voice answered.

"I'm Mrs. Polen," she said. "Jimmy isn't here. He's over at the coast, fishing. Be back tomorrow. Can I help?"

"No," said Humphrey. "Thank you." On his way to the bar, he stopped at the juke-box, studied the list of pieces and shoved in a nickel. He slid through a narrow opening between two fat cops, caught the bartender's eye.

"Cognac," said Humphrey. "Double." When it came, he sipped it and listened to the music. The brandy was fine, but somehow the music didn't sound so good. That was wrong. It was mostly accordion music. A man was in a state when good accordion-playing left him cold.

"YOU look terrible," Oscar rasped as he fished the bottle out with shaking hands and filled a glass. "If you were a drinking man, I'd say you had a hangover."

"Pour another," Humphrey said. "I have."

"You what?" Oscar's mouth hung open.

"There are times," said Humphrey, "when man needs something stronger than milk. Last night was such a time."

"I don't blame you, really," said Oscar. "After what happened. It looks very bad for Mrs. Borsden." He sighed. "At least we made a thousand out of it."

"What did the paper say?"

"You mean you haven't seen it?"

"My eyes don't focus well this morning," Humphrey said.

Oscar unfolded his copy of the *News*. "The works," he said. "That's what they give her. You can't blame them. She looks guilty as hell, if it's true what they say."

"What?"

"That she talked to her son on Sunday, came here Monday. Tried to see Mrs. Peck at the office and at the house here in town. Went out there Monday night in a cab. The cab waited. Took the cab into Pollasky, let it go. Then rented a cabin in an auto court under the name of Mrs. Rolph. They found traces of blood in the sink drain-pipe. Claim she washed out a dress in the sink. They got the dress. Blood on it. Mrs. Peck's blood."

"Do they mention us? Or our secretary?"

"You—" said Oscar.

"Yes," said Humphrey. "We had Mrs. Borsden for a while; then we lost her. . . . They speak of a motive?"

"Just say they've discovered sufficient motive—don't say what."

"The boys are letting their publisher down easy," said Humphrey. "They are loath, at the moment, to let the public in on the fact she cut off Joe Borsden's hand. Mrs. Mrs. Borsden hasn't confessed, has she?"

"Nope. She says she didn't do it. That, according to the paper, is all she will say."

"Chapman should be there to confer with her this morning. Borsden saw him last night and made arrangements."

"We should be lawyers," Oscar said sadly. "All that dough, and us with only a thousand—" He broke off as the buzzer on his desk indicated Robbie would have words with him, and he flipped the switch down.

"There's a Mr. Price here to see you," Robbie said.

"What's he want?"

"Tell her to send him in," Humphrey said. "He's my pal."

He didn't look like Humphrey's pal. Anger oozed from him. He had a newspaper rolled up in his hand, and he waved it in Humphrey's face. "You double-crossing—"

"Laugh when you speak of double-crosses," Humphrey said. "Beaumont resigned. What the hell more do you want?"

Price unrolled the paper, dropped it in Humphrey's lap. Then Humphrey agreed he had reason to be annoyed. The paper was the *Recorder*.

There was a two-column box in the middle of the murder-smeared front page, and a two-column picture of William Chapman topped the box.

Joaquin Citizens Committee Drafts
Crusading Attorney as Write-in
Mayoralty Candidate

the head read. The subhead wasn't nice, either. Charges of graft, widespread corruption in city government hurled. Humphrey read the lead:

With the withdrawal of Frank H. (For Honest) Beaumont, from the Joaquin mayoralty campaign, a group of prominent citizens, headed by Attorney Harry Dunecht, last night launched a campaign to elect William Chapman, crusading attorney for labor, as mayor of the city, scene of the brutal Gertrude Peck murder. A whirlwind drive to have Chapman's name written in at the next Tuesday's election was started, following Chapman's agreement to be drafted.

So that was where Max went from Hyatt's house, Humphrey told himself. Out to Dunecht's. And Max had evidently used the Campbell name to persuade Mr. Dunecht to head the committee. Well, it was nice that Dunecht remained grateful. Usually guys forgot when you helped them out—even if you found out for them who murdered their father. He said: "I had nothing to do with this, Mr. Price."

"You're a damned liar," Price snapped.

Humphrey got out of the chair. His head ached, and he was tired—particularly of Mr. Price. He tried to look as mean as he felt. Apparently he did, for Price took a couple of steps back.

"I don't like you," Humphrey said. "I don't like anything about you. I made a deal last night. I've carried out part of it. Beaumont resigned. I hope to fulfill the rest of the bargain today."

Price said: "Rot! They've solved the case."

"They think they have," said Humphrey.

"Hilton was with you last night," Price snarled. "Chapman's the Borsden attorney. And you had nothing to do with it?"

"That's what I said. I've no control over Hilton. He seems to want to see a change in mayors in Joaquin. I might agree with him, but this was his idea."

"You got your license through Shelbourne," Price said. "You're going to lose it the same way. You've got to have a license from the police commissioners to stay in this town. There won't be any license."

Then Oscar did an unprecedented thing. He hit the desk with the flat of his hand. "By God, Price," he yelled, "you've gone too far. You've insulted us, employed vile epithets. We were back of you, right back of you. My friend Shelbourne—" He followed the name with a little sigh. "But if I must, I must."

"Must what?" Price glared at him.

"Rid the city of thieves and charlatans," said Oscar. "You think it can't be done? I'll take the stump again. Deprive us of our right to make a living, and we'll put you back in the gutter where you belong," thundered Oscar.

"Put away," said Price, and marched out of the office. "Magnificent," said Humphrey. "I didn't know you had it in you."

"Don't underestimate me," said Oscar. Then he stared at the door. Robbie was coming through it, and Robbie was so excited she couldn't get the words out fast enough: "Max Hilton is on the phone," she said. "He says Hyatt is sending men up to arrest me, and"—she pointed at Humphrey—"you. They've found out it was I who took Mrs. Borsden to the auto camp."

"What next!" said Humphrey.

"Hurry," said Robbie. "They'll be here right away." He frowned at her. "And you?"

"I'm staying here," said Robbie. "It won't matter about me. You've things to do. Haven't you?"

Humphrey nodded. "I don't want you in jail. But they won't put you there. Go down to the D. A.'s office with them. Admit you took Mrs. Borsden to Morgantown. Say you did it on my orders. Oscar will back that up. If Hyatt gets too tough, wave Max Hilton at him. We can still print that letter. Beaumont's sudden resignation makes it an even better weapon. Now this is important, Robbie. At ten o'clock tonight—"

Robbie listened to his instructions, her eyes big with surprise and horror. There was no doubting the significance of what he told her to do. It was a trap for the murderer of Mrs. Gertrude Peck.

CHAPTER TWENTY



HE night light in the office of the A. B. C. Garage—twenty-four-hour storage—Drive-Ur-Self agency—dispelled little of the darkness from the tiny room. Jim Polen sat tipped back in the swivel-chair, his feet on the desk, his hat down over his eyes.

The garage was very quiet. Now and then a car went by but Polen didn't move. He sat there with his feet on the desk, breathing heavily, regularly.

Something moved in the dark garage. A figure came slowly and stealthily toward the open office door, but if Polen heard, he paid no heed. His back was to the door. The figure reached the sill, hesitated, took a step forward, raised an arm. And at that moment the lights went on.

Mary Otis stood above the chair where Polen had been sitting, and there was a two-foot length of pipe in her hand. Polen had rolled off to the left and was scrambling to his feet. Humphrey Campbell, gun in hand, leaned against a filing-cabinet.

"I got here first," Humphrey said. "Thought I'd wait."

The pipe clattered to the cement floor. "What a dope!" she said. "I should have known."

"Robbie has a convincing voice," said Humphrey. "Sit down, Miss Otis. You remember Mr. Polen?"

"I remember him," Miss Otis said. She sat down.

"What a damned dope!" she repeated, and fumbled in her pocket.

"Here." Humphrey held out a packet of cigarettes hopelessly.

"I prefer my own, thanks." She sighed. "Oh, well. You knew I did it, anyway. I'm glad it's this way. I had nothing against him." She nodded toward Polen. "I'd have felt like the devil when he died."

Polen gulped, looked ill.

"I half expected a visit from you last night," said Humphrey. "Thought you might be waiting for me when I got back from Hyatt's."

"I gave that some consideration."

Humphrey slid the gun back in his shoulder holster, took a paper from his pocket, held it toward her. "Your confession," he explained.

"That's thoughtful of you," she said, and took it from him. She moved to the desk, sat down and put it on the dingy blotter. The white light from above put hollows in her cheeks, made her look a good deal older than she was. She read:

I killed Gertrude Ellen Peck.

At eleven thirty Monday night, April 27, I rented a car from the A. B. C. garage. I parked it off the road above the lodge gate, walked in. The lights were on. Through the front window I saw her sitting by the fire, drinking.

I went to the woodshed, found the light plant and threw the switch, cutting off the power. In a few moments, Mrs. Peck came out with a flashlight. When she stooped over the engine, I killed her.

I took off her clothes, wrapped her body in a canvas, carried it down to the boathouse and wedged it under the seat of the rowboat I found there. Then I turned the boat over and pushed it out into the stream.

Returning to the lodge, I took her robe and slippers from the closet. These I smeared with blood and with the underclothes I had removed from her body, buried them near the pier. I hosed off the pier, being careful not to wash the shovel. On my way back to the house I swept the walk leading from the boathouse. The bedroom and bathroom I arranged so that it would seem Mrs. Peck had slept, arisen, and bathed. In the kitchen, I arranged things so that it would be obvious that she was preparing breakfast just before she was murdered. I then emptied the woodbox, putting the wood and kindling that was in it back in the woodshed. I washed the floor of the shed, returned to my car and drove back to Joaquin. The car I returned Tuesday afternoon.

"Concise but not literary," Miss Otis said. She nodded at Humphrey. "Very good, though. Few items missing, but on the whole, good."

"What did I overlook?"

"The coveralls and tennis shoes I bought Monday night in Pollasky," Miss Otis said. "Around seven o'clock. How do you suppose I kept—" She didn't finish the sentence. Her hands shook, and she wet her lips.

"I wondered," said Humphrey. "And what did you do with the rest of her clothes?"

"Bundled them up with a couple of rocks and tossed them in the river below the bridge. Why did you pick me, anyway?"

"Too much planning. Some day I'll explain the Campbell hypothesis of simplicity in homicide."

"Spare me that," said Miss Otis dryly.

"Beautiful planning, though," said Humphrey. "The wet bath-mat and towels. The elusive smell of toilet water. The nightgown tossed carelessly on the chair. The open book by the night-stand. The cigarette-stubs in the tray by the bed—ones she had smoked, too. Not a detail overlooked in the bedroom. All very feminine—too feminine."

"Go on," said Miss Otis.

"In the kitchen, one detail wrong," said Humphrey.

"Yes?"

"The first thing one does with a wood stove is light it," said Humphrey. "One doesn't get out the oranges and eggs and bread. One doesn't put the coffee on."

"Get back in character," Miss Otis suggested. "The one business doesn't fit."

"Sorry," said Humphrey. "You planned the breakfast too well. You should have emptied the wood-box, taken the lids off the stove, stuck some paper in the fire-box and let it go at that. Maybe got the coffee-pot out on the sink. I'm an old hand at cooking on a wood stove. A farm boy."

"God, you're clever," Miss Otis said.

"And the dirt on the shovel: that wasn't good. Too elaborate, Miss Otis. Pointed right to the fact that something was buried close at hand. To the fact you wanted them to find what was buried."

"They fell for it, didn't they? How was I to know?"—she found more sarcasm—"that such a brilliant detective was buried in Joaquin?"

"Didn't I find Joe Borsden for you?"

"Child's-play."

"You paid two hundred and fifty for it," said Humphrey. "Shall I reveal further my prowess at deduction?"

"Do, Mr. Campbell."

"Consider the crime itself," said Humphrey. "The weapon used. When you take an ax and chop a woman up, you need a pretty good reason." He saw Polen shudder, glance back at Mary Otis. She might have been listening to a lecture. "Madness is one reason," Humphrey continued. "Blind anger and a desire for revenge, another. No one in this mess seemed more than ordinarily deranged.

Rage, then, because of what had happened to Joe Borsden. Who cared about Joe? His mother and you, Miss Otis. And neither of you knew until the other day how he had lost his hand. Mrs. Borsden heard about it Sunday. You found out Monday. Mrs. Peck cut his hand off. She was hacked to death. There it was. The reason for the murder Monday night instead of two weeks ago Monday night, or next week or last May."

"Then why not Mrs. Borsden?"

"The crime was elaborately planned. Mrs. Borsden's movements Monday night weren't. She left a trail even a deputy sheriff could follow. She fumbled too much. You didn't."

"I like efficiency," Miss Otis said. "I like people with well-ordered, logical minds. If you go on, you'll have me admiring you."

HUMPHREY bowed. "Consider the other figures in this mess," he went on. "Take Beaumont and Swett, who heard Joe threaten Mrs. Peck Monday morning. Neither one are ax men. Swett had no motive, so we won't bother with him. Beaumont did. Suppose he decided to take advantage of Joe's wild threat. He would have pointed the crime right at Joe. All the planning would have been toward that end. It wasn't. The planning was to conceal the hour of death. Anyway, Beaumont didn't know where Joe was—you know that. He told you so."

"He could have been lying."

"He wasn't. And he had no reason to lie. Which brings us to Don Skeel. Let's say his motive was strong enough for murder. He was with Irene until two. He was seen by the clerk at his hotel a little after that time, not again until late Tuesday morning. Then why all the effort to hide the time of the killing?"

"You're explaining this—not I."

"When I took a look at the layout at the lodge," Humphrey continued, "it seemed obvious what had happened. The murderer wanted Mrs. Peck to stay unidentified as long as possible. The murderer wanted to cover up the time of the murder. The house told a straightforward story. Mrs. Peck had risen, bathed, put on underclothes and robe and slippers, gone to the kitchen. She had started breakfast, discovered no fuel, gone to the woodshed. Everything pointed to the fact the murderer had never entered the house."

"Admit it, Mr. Campbell. Weren't you taken in?"

"I was confused," said Humphrey. "Thus the delay. People to eliminate. Motives all over the place. The election, and the peculiar behavior of the *News* in that direction. Joe making confessions. His mother showing up. But I'm a suspicious man. I refused to accept the obvious. The house told me one story—that Mrs. Peck had been murdered Tuesday morning. You couldn't tell by looking at the woodshed, boathouse and body, when she had been murdered. Only when you dug around a bit and noticed the shovel blade. That led you to the buried clothes. So the obvious conclusion to draw was that the murderer didn't go into the house, that the murderer didn't want the law to know Mrs. Peck was killed at breakfast-time, and tried to cover up that fact."

"Wasn't that reasonable?" asked Miss Otis. "If the murderer was waiting in the woodshed wouldn't the sensible thing be to stay out of the house? One can easily—so easily—leave stray fingerprints around."

"The law thought it reasonable," replied Humphrey. "I didn't. The first question that popped into my mind was how would the murderer know Mrs. Peck would go to the woodshed. I found a logical answer. I figured that the murderer took a gander at the woodbox, saw it was empty, knew Mrs. Peck would go out for wood in the morning. At that time I was almost willing to accept the obvious time of the killing—Tuesday morning. But Swett proved it wrong. He said the woodbox was full Monday night. So Mrs. Peck didn't go out to get wood. Why then? The answer was

staring me right in the face: The light plant! As I pointed out last night, there's no reason to fiddle around with a light plant in broad daylight if you only want to use it for lights. But if the light plant suddenly went off at night and left you in darkness, you'd go out and see why."

"Which she did."

"Which meant she was killed at night. Yet it was apparent she had been killed at breakfast and the murderer had made a couple of attempts to conceal the fact. There was the solution. You were the only person who couldn't have killed Mrs. Peck Tuesday morning."

"But—"

Humphrey interrupted her. "I know. You also covered up for Monday night. Left the car in the garage. That cooked you, really. Leaving the car there and renting another. You might have made it if you had taken your own car. You had a perfect right to be driving around the valley all Monday evening if you wanted to. An excuse would have been simple to figure out. The simple way, Miss Otis. But you weren't sure the breakfast gag would work. So you tried to prove you were in the hotel from dinner-time until after breakfast. I checked the garages and came across Mr. Polen and here we are."

"It might have worked," said Miss Otis. "It nearly worked." Her voice was tired.

"Was it love for Joe, or his music?" Humphrey spoke softly now. He wasn't smiling. There was sympathy in his eyes. She saw it, smiled wanly at him.

"Both."

"You guessed about the hand."

"First. Then she told me. She was half drunk, and when I asked her, she boasted of it. And about what she was going to do to the Borsden family. I decided to kill her then." Her eyes were cold, her face grim. "As I drove back to Joaquin I planned it. Bought the coveralls and shoes in Pollasky. Rented a car from Mr. Polen. Then went back to the lodge and killed her."

"You see now that it was too elaborate?"

"How would you have done it?"

"Taken her swimming. Held her under. Walked across a street and tripped her in front of a bus. Hell, there are any number of fine, simple ways! Unimaginative people use them every day."

She shuddered. So did Polen. He was standing with his mouth open. He said, "Shouldn't I call the cops?"

"No," said Humphrey. "We'll have no truck with cops or deputy sheriffs. We'll give credit where it will do the most good."

"Where's that?" asked Miss Otis.

"To Mr. Chapman," Humphrey said. "Do you mind being used as a political football?"

She shrugged. "I don't relish the idea. I suppose I have no choice. Maybe I merit none." She gave him a twisted smile. "You're an odd one. You seem not at all horrified at what I did. The way I killed her."

"What does the way matter?" Humphrey said. "Murder is murder. A gun or a knife or a club or an ax. Some weapons do a neater job, that's all."

"The old philosopher," said Miss Otis. "What about Chapman?"

"It's this way. He's running for mayor. Getting your name written in on a ballot is a tough job. If he has the support of the *News*, he might make it. And if he walks into the newspaper office with you and says, 'Boys, look what I found,' they're going to be reasonably impressed."

Miss Otis stood up. "Let's go, then," she said.

THE judge was an old man in a rumpled seersucker suit with a few gravy stains on the lapel. You could tell by the way he kissed the bride that he was a dear old guy.

Humphrey gave the judge's clerk an envelope with a twenty-dollar bill in it, followed Joe Borsden and Robbie out into the hall.

"Thanks for standing up with us," Joe Borsden said.

"I like to see my friends get married," Humphrey said. "Anyway, it will be on our bill."

"I'm sorry about leaving," Robbie said. "You're sure you don't want me to come up and break the new girl in?"

"We'll struggle along," said Humphrey. "Anyway, there is no new girl yet. One of my chores today is to find one."

"Pick a plain girl," Joe said. "Then you won't lose her."

"It's an idea. Good-by, kids."

"Good-by," Joe said. Robbie moved close, took his hand, reached up and kissed him. Then they hurried away.

AS he watched them go, there was an emptiness in him, and a loneliness. And presently he followed the long dim corridor to the door and saw sunlight flooding the park. No gold in it. Old, he thought. Old and tired and empty. He sighed and made his way across the grass to the street and along it to the Cooper Building. Across the way two men were putting a new sheet on the billboard that had advocated the election of Frank H. for *Honest* Beaumont. He went into the building, stepped into the elevator. The blonde smiled, and he removed his hat.

He stood inside the door, looking at Robbie's desk, for a moment. He shrugged, opened the inner door.

"Late," said Oscar.

"You forget," said Humphrey. "There was a wedding."

"A fine couple," said Oscar. "They'll be very happy—for a while. I suppose they'll take the kid to live with them now the custody business is settled."

Humphrey nodded. He sat down, looked around him with distaste. What a life! A man would be better off in the army, maybe.

"An idea struck me," said Oscar. "This morning. The work I did for Chapman—yeoman! I was wondering if you and I couldn't reorganize the police department. Of course, Al's feelings might be hurt. But he's a gone gander, anyway."

"You want to be chief of police?"

"That's the idea."

"God forbid!" said Humphrey. "Anyway, I couldn't stand being a cop."

"You'd make a fine chief of detectives. Your brilliant work. By the way—how did you get Mary Otis to go to the garage that night? You didn't tell me."

"I had Robbie"—he said the name tenderly, almost reverently—"call her and ask for me. Naturally, I wasn't there. So Robbie said when I came, to tell me the garage I was hunting for was the A. B. C. on Huston Street. That's all there was to it."

"Not bad," said Oscar. "We're going to miss Robbie."

"Yes," said Humphrey.

Oscar rose. "I've a couple of things to do. Some dames are coming up about the job. You take care of that?"

Humphrey nodded. Oscar put on his hat, smiled, departed. Humphrey leaned against the door-jamb and watched him go. He was standing there, staring soberly at Robbie's desk when the outer door opened. A young woman smiled at him, a very beautiful young woman. She was tall and she was blonde, and there was nothing artificial about her bloneness.

"Good morning," the blonde said.

"Come in," said Humphrey.

"The agency sent me," the blonde said. Her eyes were big and her eyes were blue, a very lovely blue. "I haven't had much experience," she said hesitantly.

"You can type?"

"Pretty well."

"And take shorthand?"

"I'm not very fast yet."

"But you'll improve," said Humphrey.

"Oh, yes," the girl said eagerly.

"I think you'll do," said Humphrey. "There's your desk."

THE END

An able writer and one-time fighting pilot with sixteen victories to his credit tells of his battle with the Red Baron.

By ARCH WHITEHOUSE

AIRMEN of the Other War who boast that they once fought the famous Baron von Richthofen, Germany's premier ace, are generally looked on with suspicion and distrust. So great has been the aura around this almost legendary figure, that one who boasts he once fought the Mighty Manfred is reminded in a gentle manner that most airmen who met up with von Richthofen never lived to get back and tell the tale.

They point out that von Richthofen is credited with eighty victories, that he was almost invincible in the air, and that he was the leader of the redoubtable Richthofen Circus.

As the years go on, the legend of von Richthofen will surpass anything that can possibly happen in this war. He blazed through a war that even then was new. The fighting airplane was an almost unknown quality, but it produced stories of heroism, sacrifice and romance such as had not been known since the jousting days of Arthur and Lancelot. How great von Richthofen really was will never be known, because at best he was a manufactured hero. He was built up by the German Air Service, because the German Air Service needed a hero. The great Max Immelmann had gone; Boelke had been sent to his end by a midair crash with one of his own men. The British had overcome the initial advantage the front-firing Fokker gun had given the Germans, and the new British fighters such as the Camel, the S.E.5 and the glorious Bristol Fighter were taking the play away from the Kaiser's airmen. These are facts, not fancies. Von Richthofen did not begin to come into his own as a fighting airman until early in 1917.

The Germans might as well have selected Werner Voss, the so-called Checkerboard Ace; but they wanted a representative hero, and von Richthofen was of the nobility, whereas Voss was merely the son of a lowly Krefeld dyer. When the war broke out in 1914, von Richthofen joined the regiment of his caste—the Uhlands; whereas Voss, the son of a dyer, had to be content with a commission in the Krefeld Hussars, an organization that would rank with an American militia outfit. Voss is credited with forty-eight victories (twenty-two in twenty days), and they are all actual victories that were confirmed. Von Richthofen is credited with eighty, mainly on his

own say-so, for no less than twenty-one cannot be found in the records of the German archives in Berlin.

After the war the British, for diplomatic reasons, paid great homage to the Red Knight of Germany; but if one reads their books and letters closely, it will be discovered that they had much more respect for Werner Voss, the Checkerboard Ace who actually led his own small squadron, asked no favors of anyone, and went to his death at the hands of a pack of British S.E.5's when he believed he was being followed and supported. A swell case of treachery could have been worked up out of Voss' end.

Major James McCudden, V.C., who saw Voss go down, later wrote: "As long as I live, my admiration for Voss, who all by himself braved eight British planes for more than ten minutes and actually harmed some of them, will never cease. He was the most courageous German flyer I have ever had the chance to fight."

All this may seem irrelevant to my own part in von Richthofen's war career, but it is explained here, so that certain details will be understood.

Stories of Real Experience

BLUE BOOK is glad to receive and to print true stories of real experience, running from one thousand to four thousand words each. For each of those accepted each month we will pay according to our appraisal of its length and strength, an average price of \$50. Manuscripts should be addressed to the Real Experience Editor, the Blue Book Magazine, 230 Park Ave., New York, N. Y. Preferably but not necessarily they should be typewritten, and should be accompanied by a stamped and self-addressed envelope for use in case the story is unavailable.

A pen name may be used, but the writer's real name and permanent address should accompany the manuscript. Be sure to write your name and correct address in the upper left-hand corner of the first page of your story, and keep a copy as insurance against loss of the original; for while we handle manuscripts with great care, we cannot accept responsibility for their return. As this is a monthly contest, one to two months may elapse before you receive a report on your story.

I Fought

I should explain that I was one of that gay band of adventurers who crossed the Atlantic in 1914—not to fight for democracy, but to do something about a situation I honestly believed worthy of my poor attention. In other words, I was a romantic youngster setting off on a quest; and to this day, I believe it was the cleanest and finest thing I have ever done. There were no other values or problems considered. I was young enough to see, and believe in my own mind, that a great military power was becoming oppressive, and that someone ought to do something about it. Nationality, flags or government had absolutely nothing to do with it; and if this is idealism, make the most of it.

I went to Canada and tried to enlist, but was unsuccessful. Then I wangled my way to Halifax, N. S., and got aboard a cattle-boat and worked my way to Liverpool.

Once in England, I joined a Yeomanry outfit, which is actually a Territorial mounted-infantry mob. The regiment went to France on November 5th, 1914. I stayed behind a short time to get training on the machine-gun. My training lasted exactly two weeks, though my sergeant instructor told me it takes three years to make a machine-gunner in peacetime.

Our outfit went through 1915 and saw the beginning of trench warfare. We served time in the trenches, played our part in support, and on Easter Monday morning of 1916 actually carried out a cavalry charge at Monchy, during the temporary break-through on the Somme. The machine-gun teams went in to support other regiments too, and our regimental record carries a startling amount of amazing campaigns. They finished up, cleaning up the Austrians on the Piave in 1918 for benefit of the Italians.

But this form of glory was not for me. I had seen an old pusher fighter in the air during the Somme show, and I decided that here was my dish. Besides, there were no horses to groom and guard in the Royal Flying Corps, as it was known then. I applied for a transfer and eventually got it, and became a front-gunner aboard a biplane pusher of the Fee type in No. 22 Squadron.

In the early part of 1917 we were flying as two-seater fighters, but doing bombing, photography and low-altitude trench-strafing. The fact that I

Von Richthofen

was doing all these things in a knee-high nacelle stuck out in front of a plane doing 95 m.p.h. at twelve thousand feet, did not seem terribly dangerous in those days. Today I can keel over on my face at the thought of it. However, I did fairly well, had a lot of luck and eventually worked my way through the flying chairs of Mars to become a single-seater fighter pilot.

But during my spell as an aerial gunner with No. 22, which ran from September 1916 until January of 1918, I was conscious only of an impersonal enemy. I knew the Fokker and the Albatros; I had fought often; but the personal factor never entered my mind. I had heard of a chap named Immelmann who was supposed to have invented the Immelmann turn. Boelke was something of a legendary figure, but we knew nothing of him. As for the Red Knight, he was bracketed with the other mysterious figures such as the Mad Major, the Angel of Mons and Capt. Ball. We knew Ball had been at our field once, but he had passed on. The Mad Major was an invention of the gravel-crushers up the line. The P. B. I. (Poor Bloody Infantry) could always invent a new character. We were never quite sure about the Angel of Mons, but we liked the idea.

BUT evidently there was a Red Knight or a Bloody Baron, as the P. B. I. dubbed him. Whether he was known as such throughout the R. F. C. I have no idea. The name von Richthofen was used, but so were those of Voss, Wolff and Schaeffer; they were simply names, however, and not recognizable characters. This is a point I have tried to explain for years. We did not know these men or have any reason to recognize them in the air. What we knew of them came through German reports that somehow sifted through the neutral countries. You can't recognize a man in the air, no matter how close you may come to him. In those days we bundled up for warmth, and we always wore goggles. The fact that some went in for brightly decorated planes could not always be relied on either, because the fortunes of war in the air made it highly improbable that you would be flying the same ship, patrol after patrol. If one got into trouble in the air over Ypres, it was easy to say: "I think old von Richthofen had a go at me this afternoon."

I FOUGHT von Richthofen on April 13th, 1917, and was shot down—but until ten years later I never knew who had downed me.

This is how it all happened.

The details of this incident are still to be found in my little black book, my notebook which I carried on all patrols in those days. The page is dirty, wind-torn, much scrawled and very oil-stained. The details would not be very clear to the uninitiated, for they read as follows:

10:30....A7244.

4/13/17....Captain Bush.

Clouds at 4,000.

6 E.A....11:30 over Lille.

10 E. A....12:10 over Roulers,

Engaged, 12:35.

Shooting at us....4 E.A. over Roulers.

Shot down near Monchy....red plane.

From these meager details and a middle-aged memory, then, I must reconstruct that fight. My pilot was a Captain Bush, the son of a West-of-England minister. He had served two years in an infantry outfit and had won the Military Cross. The machine, an F.E.2.b pusher biplane, was numbered A7244, and my book discloses that we used as many as four different planes in a week, because of gunfire and Archie damage. We were part of "C" Flight, and we had six machines in our flight. We were led by Captain Carleton Clement of Vancouver, British Columbia.

We were slated to do a camera-bus protection show. We really were hot as fighters, and practically all of us had fairly good records. The camera planes, as I remember, were tough old Ack-W's (Armstrong-Whitworths) or they might have been R.E.8's, affectionately known as Harry Tates. We met them circling over Arras. The clouds were bad for good picture-work, and I have another note in my book which reads: "*There are the camera planes, over Arras. I see eight E.A.*" (Enemy Aircraft) "*coming up from behind Douai. Better keep our eyes open.*"

It was my duty to keep my pilot informed of what was going on, and since I had had more time in the air than he, Captain Bush placed a lot of questionable faith in my opinions and reports. He used to say that if he ever flew with anyone else, he'd go West.

(He was right. He did.)

Remember, I first saw eight enemy aircraft coming up from behind Douai; and von Richthofen's Circus, I have since learned, was operating from Marck, a spot a few miles north of Courtrai, and it is quite possible that the Red Knight was among those who took off to waylay us later on.

There's always something queer or hair-raising about a camera show. You seem to be continually held up for something that is never quite clear. By the time we were properly organized, we had half a dozen Fees and three slogging old camera busses. The Boche were easing back and forth a few miles away, watching us like a lot of prowling vultures. I knew they were climbing for height, but in my own mind I figured that since we had nine against their eight, and that we had gunners rather than relying on fixed guns, we stood a reasonable chance of holding them off if they slammed in. Below, I could see the camera chaps hunched over their boxes, ramming the plate-changing handle back and forth to get proper spacing. There was a tense air of expectancy while all this is going on, and I suppose we were all looking for a white signal-light from below telling us that they had their strip and that we could clear off and get back on our own side.

I think I did a little observing on the side and pin-pointed some gunflashes and checked movement of transport on the roads in the Hun back areas, and was intent on a new piece of sap-head work when Captain Bush yelled at me: "Righto! He blew his light!" and pointed over the side.

I saw the last trail of the sparkly arc, and knew they had their pictures all right. Up front, with two streamers on his tail, Captain Clement, our Flight Commander, was signaling with his hand, and we turned back toward Arras and escorted the camera ships all the way across the line. A few Jerry ack-acks banged at us and belched their black smoke; but we evaded them, and I suppose we all congratulated ourselves that we had been on a particularly cushy show.

YOU'RE always kidding yourself along that way. That's just when things begin to hum. Just when the sun begins to creep through and warm you up a trifle, seeming to cooperate with the belief that you're in the

clear for another day, the Old Guy with the Book turns another page.

Out of nowhere came a cavalcade of Albatros D-3's that did not spit a slug until their props were almost chewing up our rudders. How we managed to stay aloft after that first charge, the Old Guy with the Book only knows. Fortunately, some of the other gunners were more awake and alert than I, and they opened up quickly enough to at least get them gingerish in the last few dozen yards of their dive.

I was soon up on my locker, firing a few frantic bursts over our top plane. That's the sort of tail-defense you had to produce aboard a Fee.

I looked down toward Clement's plane and saw the camera planes beating it back across the line with their priceless plates. Yes, they used plates in those days, so that if you made a bad landing and cracked them all up, you could go back again and get some more.

A GREEN-AND-WHITE Albatros went down in blue-black smoke and disappeared. I do not know who got it. Most certainly I didn't.

They came in on us again and pounded away, and I was amazed at their garish colors. Blue noses, red wheels, green prop-bosses and yellow wings. It was a tornado of color that threw death-streamers of sparkling tracer. Two came at us from a stiff angle that left me blocked off by my own wingtip. I tried shooting through the struts and risked clipping our own flying-wires, but Captain Bush yelled at me, so I chucked that and climbed up on the locker again.

Another Jerry went down in flames, throwing his tail away on the way down. Bush doll-danced our plane all over the sky, and we finally managed to drive them off. Bush kept on stunting her until I finally sensed he'd stunted us clear out of the formation. When I slipped down off my locker, I discovered that we were all alone in the air. Where the other Fees had gone to, I had no idea.

"You all right?" asked Bush.

I nodded, and he turned north instead of beating it for our side of the line. I stared at him, but he had what is now known as a dead pan. I knew then he had no intention of going back. He was out to win the war on his own.

"You're heading for Roulers, you know," I informed him, and showed him my map.

He nodded, perfectly satisfied. I pointed ahead and indicated a formation of about ten enemy machines patrolling back and forth about two miles away.

"Theirs or ours?" he asked.

I stood up, crossed my two index fingers to indicate the Jerry insignia.

"Theirs—and there's too many of them!" I yelled at him.

He flew on, studying them with his calm gray eyes. He nodded finally, and agreed that I might be right. Then, to my astonishment, he turned east, deeper into enemy territory.

"Where are you heading?" I demanded.

"Going around them, from the Jerry side!"

"But they're Huns!"

"I know. They'll never expect us to come in from *their* side, will they?"

I gave up. We were already ten miles on the wrong side of the line. Now he wanted to go in deeper behind Lille and attack them from the rear! Then I remembered that my especial Captain Bush was never quite sure where he was. I rammed my map into his dial and pointed: "Look! You're over here! Here's our line—over *here*!"

He peered at it for several seconds, and gradually the beautiful truth began to sink in. A clatter of Archie bursts helped too. Four lovely black carnations burst out just in front of us, and we had to skitter out of it. He nosed down and rammed his rudder over and started for home. I took a note and wrote: "*10 E.A. . . . 12:10 over Roulers.*"

Then out of nowhere they came. They always seem to come out of nowhere. Four gaudy Albatros! I glanced about and discovered that in spite of his move to get to our line, Captain Bush had somehow managed to get over Roulers. I gave him as dirty a look as I could muster, and whirled on the Jerries.

Captain Bush got me a splendid opening and I gave them plenty. They were in a tight V formation, and it was impossible for more than one to get a real bead on us, since they carried fixed front guns. I had had enough experience to know how far these single-seater fighters could go, and what their limitation of fire happened to be. The oncoming leader took a full packet in the nose, and he zoomed up; and the others had to swerve sharply to clear him. I swung the front gun around then, and did a little hosing and scattered them some.

They reformed behind us, and I had to scramble up on the locker again to man the gun, which was on a telescopic mounting for firing over the top plane. Only three came back after us, and I blazed away again; and when Bush had stopped his skating all over the sky, I could see only one.

That one was a scarlet baby, and I found myself watching him, fascinated. Still, I did manage to warn my pilot. "Beat it," I said. "There'll be more of them!"

But the red devil hung on and continued to peck away at us. I really wasted a lot of good ammunition on

him, until suddenly he started throwing old flat-irons at us—at least that's what it seemed like. Great chunks were gouged out of our top wing. The Fee jerked and jumped and almost tossed me out of the nacelle. I glanced down at my pilot, and he was twisting back and forth in his seat, evidently trying to find the guy behind with the sledge-hammer. He snapped at the ignition switch, and I stared out toward the tail to watch the propeller quit. It did quit, but instead of being in its usual position, it was facing upward toward the sky.

"We must be in a steep nose-dive!"

I figured.

But I looked around, and everything else was in its normal position. I looked at the prop again, and it was still flat. Another flat-iron went through the top plane, and a red devil roared over our heads. There were others too now, sporting greens and browns, but I was too busy to bother.

My pilot was shouting at me. I had an idea he wanted to use one of the movable guns, since he had nothing else to do. I was still trying to figure out that prop. Then it all dawned on me: the rear portion of our Beardmore engine had been blasted away somehow; it had buckled the prop-shaft in such a manner that the four-bladed prop was in an almost horizontal position. A chunk of Archie shell had banged through the crankcase and had cut a connecting rod in half. The lower half had continued its merry round, and had cut the last two cylinders away.

"Go that way!" I yelled at my pilot. "Our lines are over there!"

I wanted to make certain he would not try any more of this encircling business. We were far enough over as it was.

THE next few minutes were a nightmare of terror for me. My pilot seemed to be enjoying himself. He just sat there with the engine behind his back and watched my frantic efforts to keep the red swine off. Actually, we glided twelve miles with that orange crate, and the last I saw of the red guy was when he and a green-tailed pal were beating it past some Jerry balloons with six British Camels in hot pursuit.

We got down somehow, with the German anti-aircraft plunking away at us as we lost altitude and skimmed in over the barbed wire. Bush made a swell landing with what he had left to work with, and we rolled across a battered field and came to a halt near a scraggy hedge. We sat there for several minutes, Bush laughing uproariously, while I tried to collect my wits and breath.

"You all right?" he asked again.

I nodded and then looked myself over. My leather flying-coat was in

ribbons, frayed from the shoulders by the shower of shrapnel chunks. It crunched under my feet in the bottom of the nacelle like clinkers.

"Are we on the right side of the line?" he asked.

I pointed over the side. Three grinning figures in khaki came charging over the hedge. One, with two stripes on his sleeve, came up and bawled at us: "You chaps all right?"

"Yes, thanks," Captain Bush replied.

"Well, you aint 'arf lucky, you know!" the Cockney corporal blurted back at us. "Know who that was you was fightin'?"

"A couple of giddy Albatros blokes," Bush grinned.

"Albatros blokes? Look 'ere, matey. That was the Bloody Baron. Didn't you see 'is red plane?"

"Oh, stow it! We saw planes of all colors!"

"I know it was," the Cockney persisted. "We've seen 'im dozens of times!"

"Who?" I demanded, finally.

"The Bloody Baron," he said in a solemn tone. "Don't you know who that is? Gawd! I thought all you Flying Corpse chaps knew 'im. Mark my words, mate, you aint 'arf lucky!"

"Bloody Baron!" muttered Captain Bush. "Leave it to the gravel-crushers. They'll find someone to romanticize. Tomorrow it will be the Mad Major, and the next day a Red Devil of some kind. I know them."

But something about the whole thing got under my skin. Somehow I couldn't forget that red guy, and I intended to keep a weather eye open for him. I never knew who he was then; but ten years later I happened to pick up a copy of Floyd Gibbons' "The Red Knight of Germany," and read: *Victory No. 42: April 13, 1917, between Monchy and Feuchy; Vickers 2; two occupants, their fate unknown, downed behind the British lines.*

That was the wording of the Baron's No. 42nd victim. That was us. Von Richthofen, as usual, had mistaken the Fee for a Vickers, and this is understandable, since both machines were very much alike. However, in his official report he stated: "Together with Lieutenant Simon, I attacked a Vickers two-seater coming back from German territory. After rather a long fight, during which I so maneuvered that my adversary could not fire a single shot at me, the enemy plane plunged to the ground between Monchy and Feuchy."

Well, there was no question in my mind who was fighting whom, and whether I fired at him, does not matter now. I certainly fired plenty in his general direction. The point is that we were listed as his 42nd victim, whereas we were not wounded. The plane was damaged, but was simply dismantled and brought back, and later put in service again.

But that is how I fought von Richthofen, and lived to tell it. We fought him many times after, but never got into such trouble again. As a matter of fact, the Red Knight did not put a round into us. It was Jerry anti-aircraft that shot us down.

This is just another instance of how great war heroes are manufactured, if a manufactured war hero is wanted. Anything that went down, whenever von Richthofen was in the sky, was credited to the Red Knight. The lowly but glorious Werner Voss had to bring his victims back and drop them on some Junker general's doorstep.

They have no record of twenty-one of von Richthofen's claimed victims. I can tell them of a twenty-second.

Queer, that! I was a member of No. 22 Squadron at the time, and exactly twenty-two years of age. Figure that out, if you're interested in numbers.

Wolves at Sea

A Newfoundlander hunting seals on the ice catches a Tartar—two of them, in fact.

by OTTO
P. KELLAND

THE old sealing barque *West Wind* was stuck just as solidly as if she had been set in concrete. For thirty days we had been jammed by an ice-pack off the mouth of White Bay, Newfoundland, not a seal pelt in our holds and very poor prospects of getting any. And now there was the devil to pay. Our grub was running low, and with no sign of a break-up in the ice, we were rationed on two biscuits a man per day, plus a small piece of boiled salt beef. A husky sealer could hardly be expected to exist pleasantly on such a fare, as nothing drives a healthy man into a temper quicker than the gloomy prospect of a prolonged empty stomach. Consequently the old *West Wind's* deck became the scene of many an argument and an occasional two-fisted fight that really started over nothing.

I was a lad of sixteen years, the youngest member of the crew; and as day succeeded day, I became absolutely fed up with the bickerings and quarreling of my shipmates. One

morning I got out of my bunk and found the sun rising in a clear blue sky, with a gentle southwesterly wind blowing. Noting that we were still jammed, I decided to go on a little exploring trip all by my lonesome. So after getting my daily rations from the steward, I slipped over the ship's side unobserved and headed toward the far distant shoreline of White Bay. I chose this direction because all other points had been covered by our men in the vain search for seals days previously, and if there had been anything worth discovering, they would have undoubtedly done so.

With my seal-knife stuck in my belt and munching one of my precious

biscuits, I plodded slowly along, scanning the ice in all directions. When I was about two miles from the ship, I came to a large ice hummock. After gazing at it for a moment, I decided that from its summit I could get an excellent view of the surrounding ice-field, and could probably spot anything that might be on the move. After considerable slipping and scrambling, I succeeded in reaching the top of the hummock. Suddenly my pulses quickened, for about a mile farther on in the exact direction I had been going, I observed a small dark object on the ice. Shading my eyes from the glare of the sun, I looked steadily at the speck for a few moments and observed that it remained stationary. The black spot might mean anything, but to my hungry way of reasoning at that particular time, it could only mean the one thing I most desired: a seal; and what I couldn't have done to a cooked seal-flipper! "Sure, it must be a seal," I kept repeating to myself as I hurried along. "What else can it

be—this far out on the ocean ice?" I knew exactly what our cooks could do to a piece of seal meat: you'd have a job distinguishing it from venison when they were through.

So it was with visions of a real banquet racing through my head that I rounded the shoulder of a low ridge of ice. There, just a few yards in front of me, lay my supposed and long-wished-for seal. But I was doomed to a terrific disappointment. The one object I had seen in the distance had developed itself into two objects; and it wasn't a seal. "Dogs!" I snorted, completely disgusted. Both animals were asleep in the warm sun. They must be a strange breed, I thought, probably from Labrador.

I also noticed that the pair had recently feasted on a rabbit, for there was a spot of blood on the ice near where the two were lying, and tufts of rabbit fur were all about.

Well, I was pretty much disgruntled at not getting any seal, as you can well imagine. So I decided to take my spite out on the two strange dogs by giving them a good fright. At least I'd have the satisfaction of seeing them bound off shoreward with their tails tucked between their legs!

THE wind was blowing away from the animals and toward me, and I managed to get within ten feet of the sleeping brutes without their being aware of my presence. Picking up a fairly large chunk of ice, I hurled it with all my strength at the nearest animal, meanwhile letting out the loudest yell I could command. The ice struck the dog right at the base of the tail, and the effect was magical. Both animals popped up into the air as if propelled by hidden springs. Boylike, I stood all set for the big laugh as the frightened beasts streaked for home; but I was doomed to disappointment for the second time that day. If my action had frightened the animals, it must have been momentary. Both stood their ground and snarled at me in a most horrible fashion; yellow eyes glared at me balefully, and lips curled back to expose white fangs that gleamed in the sunlight. A thrill of horror trickled down my spine.

I now remembered well having seen pictures of these animals in my school-books. They weren't dogs at all, but wolves, dog and bitch, and they were mighty hungry-looking wolves too, their ribs sticking out like the timbers of a storm-wrecked ship. Their gray fur was scrawny and dirty-looking, and their hollow and red-rimmed eyes told very plainly that they had experienced a lean winter. And now that they had broken their fast on the luckless rabbit, it appeared that fate intended they should polish off the meal with a very foolish sixteen-year-old boy. The she-wolf kept her po-

sition directly in front of me, keeping up a continuous snarling, as if to direct all my attention toward her. Meanwhile her mate silently circled to my rear. He appeared to be taking his time, as no doubt the brutes cunningly realized I was entirely alone, and that help for me was far away. It is often claimed by some people that dumb animals have no reasoning powers, that they can't plan things out. Be that as it may, I only know that in this case the wolves were executing maneuvers that would have done credit to a human being—their unquestionable intention being to get me between them. Then a quick rush from both sides, and it would be all over with me.

WHEN I divined what the brutes were up to, I realized that I must act quickly if I were to continue living. Hastily I tore off my heavy reefer and rolled it around my right arm as a protective shield against the wolves' fangs. Drawing my long seal-knife with my left hand—I am left-handed—I charged straight at the she-wolf. It was a desperate chance, but I had to take it. She was completely taken by surprise at my sudden attack, and in her great haste to jump out of my way, her pads slipped on the smooth surface of the ice and she fell completely over on her back. Thus came my great opportunity, and I can tell you I lost no time in taking advantage of it. Before the wolf had time to scramble to her feet, I was upon her. I struck hard with my knife, and had the extreme satisfaction of seeing the keen blade bury itself right to the hilt in the brute's exposed throat. With a wild whoop of elation, I took a firmer grip on the knife-handle and withdrew it, using a sidewise cutting twist of my wrist that just about severed the wolf's head from her body. She lay still, dead jaws gaping wide.

I wasn't as fortunate in disposing of big bad wolf number two. I was just in the act of straightening up from the destruction of his mate when out of the corner of my eye I saw the big dog-wolf making directly for me with a lengthy spring, a veritable demon of hate and hunger. He was greatly incensed, no doubt, by the sudden and bloody death of his mate. His charge caught me off balance, and as he struck my right shoulder with a terrific impact, I went down on my back with a hard thud that partly knocked the senses out of me. But worst of all, the shock of the fall knocked the knife out of my hand. Instinctively, I suppose, I threw my reefer-covered right arm across my throat and face to protect them from the deadly fangs, while my left hand groped about desperately for that blessed knife. The maddened brute tore viciously at the protective reefer as he sought to get a grip on my throat.

I could not risk turning my head sidewise to look for the knife; because I feared by doing so, I would expose my jugular to the wolf's fangs. As he continued to tear at the heavy coat, I strove desperately to keep it jammed in his mouth, so as to distract his attention from the more vulnerable parts of my anatomy. I realized that I was in a desperate plight, for I found myself growing weak, undoubtedly due to the inadequate food I had been living on for so long, coupled with my recent exertions and the hard fall I had taken when the wolf knocked me down. Consequently I had to do something to relieve my tense situation, and do it quickly. Racking my brain, I suddenly got an idea. Although the upper part of my body was pinned down by the wolf, my legs were free. Drawing my knees up as quickly and carefully as possible, I placed the soles of my heavy boots against the wolf's underparts and lashed out as strong as I could with both feet.

My effort was a complete success, for the twin-footed kick sent the wolf rolling four or five feet away. I instantly sat up, and there within comparatively easy reach of my hand was my precious knife. I grasped it eagerly; but before I could regain my feet, that cursed wolf sprang up and landed on me for the second time. He seemed more ferocious than ever, and again savagely renewed his attempts to get at my windpipe. But the heavy reefer once more saved me from certain death. Raising my knife, three times I buried it deep in the wolf's mangy hide. He fell across me with a queer sobbing snarl, his last. I had just enough strength left to push the foul-some carcass off my weary body; then I fainted.

SOMETIME later I regained consciousness, and after heart-breaking difficulty managed to get to the ship. I was a sorry-looking sight indeed; my clothing was in shreds, and my face and hands were covered with the wolves' blood. I found that the captain had become alarmed at my long absence, as nobody knew where I had gone.

I told him of my hazardous experience, which I am sure, considering my gruesome appearance, he had no cause to doubt. Ordering me to my bunk, he instructed the steward to give me the best meal his stores could afford. The reprimand I naturally expected for leaving the ship without his permission did not come from this kindly soul. I suppose he considered that I had received sufficient punishment.

That night, incidentally, a stiff gale blew up. The ice-field around our ship broke, freeing us from our icy prison, and the next day we were homeward-bound.

Fireman's Hazard

Hunch led this fire-chief to keep water pouring on the inferno where a man had fallen.

by M. H. PETTY

THE alarm came in just as I was sitting down to my supper—I am fire chief of our town.

"Fire at the — Theater!"

I got over there in nothing flat, just as the fire-truck pulled up to the alley entrance and parked. Flames were spurting from the rear of the place.

"Looks like a real one, Chief," yelled the truck-driver, and I agreed with him. I took a couple of the men around front with me and got the main door opened quickly. There was a lot of smoke, so we put on our masks and went to work on the inside door, leading from the lobby into the auditorium. When we got that door open, we were stopped. The inside of the theater was a blazing inferno. No human being could have gone six feet into it and lived. The heat was intense. We backed out, choking.

But we had to get water inside that building, lots of it and quickly, or the fire was going to eat right through the walls and take in more territory. There were six of us together when we reached the roof of the adjoining building, got a ladder up and went over the ten-foot wall onto the roof of the theater. It was tricky doing, but through a hole in the roof was the only way to get water inside that building quickly. I told my men to stay as close to the side wall against the next building as possible. It was sound caution, for with no preliminary warning save a sudden horrible buckling, the roof collapsed. It must have been a gas-accumulation that exploded.

"Get back!" I yelled. "Get back over the side wall!"

They scrambled wildly. I was the last one, I thought—but just as I reached the parapet, I heard a scream above all the other din, and turned to see one of my men catapulted into the roaring pit that had opened up so suddenly. I hadn't time to be sick. I hadn't time to think about the pain in a badly wrenched leg and hip, the result of my fall off the roof of the burning building, back onto the adjoining one. All hell had broken loose when the roof collapsed. Chunks of burning embers the size of my forearm were flying in all directions and it looked

as if the entire downtown block was doomed. And one of my men was inside that hell-hole!

I had never lost a man before this in all the years I had been chief. This was Slim MacGregor down in that inferno—I had one awful glimpse of his face when I turned back on the roof. He was one of the youngsters on the volunteer force, and a swell guy. . . .

Half the town was downtown by this time, watching, and when the roof collapsed every capable man in the crowd was lending a hand—and every hand was needed, too. Garden hoses were drafted for emergency use on near-by houses, with one or two men up on each housetop kicking off embers as fast as they landed. The fire had broken through to the next building, and owners of the shops in it were hastily removing everything that could be removed. It seemed certain that the entire block must go.

But the Forest Service responded to our emergency call with two trucks and extra hoses, and I put a hose crew to work near the rear of the building, as near to where I had seen Slim go in as the boys could get it. There wasn't the ghost of a chance of being able to help him, yet I *had* to keep one hose playing steadily on that spot. Something stronger than common sense made me.

"Keep that hose steady, right on that spot," I told the boys. "Don't move from here unless the wall comes down. And don't shut off that stream of water. Keep it pouring in on that particular spot!"

I couldn't tell them why. It was too screwy to put into words. It would have taken a full-size miracle to help Slim now—and miracles went out a good many years ago.

It was three hours before we got the fire under control enough to get inside the theater building, but at last we were able to break through the riot door at the back. It was an emergency exit that would open automatically at the slightest touch from inside. Poor Slim! If he had only been able to get to it; if he had merely fallen against it he would have been on the outside.

I don't know what I expected when we got inside that door, but whatever it was, I didn't find it. Just ashes and débris. Such a mess as would have been inconceivable twenty-four hours ago. We had a hose going, of course, the stuff was too hot to handle, and we began digging as soon as we could. No luck—nothing but débris.

"Shut off that nozzle a minute," I yelled above the noise. I wanted the hose crew to move their position.

They shut off the nozzle—and I thought I had really gone nuts. For I heard him! I heard Slim's voice, calling! It must have been nerves—imagination. But I yelled, "Slim!" Then I heard him again, clearer. So did the rest of the boys. It was coming from the center rear, right where I had seen him fall in three hours ago! Right where I had kept that stream of water playing all the time!

We worked like mad, but it was twenty minutes more before we got him out. He was in between two rows of seats. When he fell in, part of the loge section fell down and slid over him, high enough over him to give him a roomy little hollow; but that wouldn't have helped very long if it hadn't been for the bricks. They came tumbling in, but the loge section held and so they built up a wall over Slim's cave, at least two feet thick. That wouldn't have saved him for the three hours he was in there, if it had not been for the steady stream of water we sent in right where he was buried, the water I kept pouring in because a hunch stronger than reason made me do it. He was suffering from shock and some burns, but he will be out of the hospital in about a week. He said he was conscious all the time.

"Got pretty darn' hot in there," he said, "and it sure would have been curtains for me if someone hadn't kept a stream of water on that cave of mine, cooling it off some and stirring up what little air there was. Half a dozen times I thought it was all up with me—then I'd hear that water sizzling and I'd begin to breathe again!"

Don't tell me that miracles went out a long time ago! I know differently.

ARIZONA in August—rocks, dust, cactus, a brassy bowl of sun beating down. Lizards panting under rock overhangs, the fearsome diamond-back rattlers scurrying away from the one thing they fear—scalding sunshine.

A turn of bad luck found me in Bisbee, home of the vast Copper Queen mine, a Phelps-Dodge holding. I was flat, because the other fellow drew the fourth king. But I had a strong back and the Copper Queen was paying six dollars a shift for trammers. The word in Bisbee is “mules,” for in certain of the workings men instead of animals are used to push the one-ton ore cars from the face of the cutting to the shaft.

So I became a mule on the graveyard shift, eleven at night to seven in the morning. The tracks inclined slightly to the skip-level so the work was not onerous, except for the heat. The water which ran along the sides of the cutting was better than bath-hot.

I ate and slept on company account, but the favors ended there. Payday was far away, but I knew a man in Don Luis who ran a cantina, and I thumbed a ride on a led horse one afternoon to make the proverbial “touch until payday.” My friend obliged. Then it was up to me to get back to Bisbee.

The road to Don Luis follows a branch of the El Paso & Southwestern, and I know now that the railroad follows the only usable pass through the rocky hills to the copper-mine city.

But I didn't know it that hot August day, so I may be forgiven for deciding to strike overland for Bisbee.

I was wearing a straw sombrero, linen shirt open at the throat, khaki trousers and a pair of “store-boughten” shoes. I was a former football player, and as tough as rawhide, so I started the hike without misgivings.

I plodded steadily along through sand and manzanita scrub, up onto the rock cap, pinnacled and forbidding, and thence toward the smelter smoke which hung in the sky like a soiled umbrella over the heat haze.

Then came disaster. I rounded two sentinel buttes of rock only to discover at my very feet the slash of a steep ravine that extended in an almost straight line across my path. Then I knew why the county road followed the railroad; why there was no well-worn trail up from Don Luis. But I was without choice. There wasn't time to return there, make the long road hike to Bisbee and be in time to go on night shift. Already the shadows were lengthening toward the east.

So I flipped a coin for “left” and “right” and left won. I turned that way, watching the opposite side narrowly for some formation that would assure my climbing out on the Bisbee side—provided I could get to the bottom from where I was.

Howdy, Rattler!

*An Arizona miner lives
to tell of an escape nar-
row indeed.*

by JOHN
J. WALLACE

Presently I found it, a pile of outcroppings surrounded by rock fragments from a slide. Above was inslanting rock, and two jutting shelves which, I figured, would take me to the rimrock. Eventually I made my way to the bottom of the fault, dropping the final six feet onto deep sand without even a perceptible jar.

After that I made my way back to the friendly rock pile and scrambled to the top. There I had to build a mound of rocks to raise me to the level of the big shelf just above my head. But presently I was on its surface, staring at the shelf rock above.

Distance had fooled me, for this second outcrop was fully three feet above my utmost ability to stretch. Worse, there was but little rubble available.

I turned then and scanned the rock face more closely. At the level of my eyes was a two-foot plate of shale that seemed about ready to fall. With a few tugs I loosened it and now had a useful rock slab. Then I gathered the rubble together and soon had two well-built heaps, three feet high, and topped with the slab of shale.

I got up gingerly, testing my footing as a diver tries out his springboard. It was solid, unmoving. Then I reached for the rimrock, but still I was three inches short of a hand-hold. I'd used the last particle of rubble, and there remained only a leap-and-grab.

So I leaped. The fingers of my left hand caught firmly over a knob-like rise on the rimrock; my right hand came down firmly at the chosen point.

But instantly I knew something was horribly wrong. For under my fingers was not rock, but something alive, harsh to the touch, *something that rattled suddenly the death-warning of the diamond-back rattlesnake!*

I knew then that the snake was trapped under my fingers, but how?

Was my hold midway of the body, which meant a quick rear and strike, or had I pinioned his neck so he could not twist about?

I hung there for what seemed an age, awaiting the thrust of fangs into my wrist. But meanwhile the buzzing rattle continued steadily, fearfully.

Then I knew that so long as I did not change position I was safe with the snake helpless, for everyone knows that rattlers sound but a single warning, unless they are trapped.

Relief cleared my mind, but I realized that whatever I did must be done within a few seconds, for I was trembling and my left hand was beginning to cramp. I dared not let go and drop to the shelf; movement of my fingers would pull the rattler over the edge—and rattlers can strike like a cat from any position.

A sudden vicious anger took me then. I hated that snake! I wanted nothing so badly as to kill him, batter him to a pulp—if only to end that horrible buzzing of his rattles.

I acted with the thought. Shifting my weight to the already painful left arm, I gripped even harder on the scales in the shadows there above me—and jerked his snakeship free. The head came first, and I had a glimpse of my fingers hard about the neck just back of the wicked, gaping jaws; then the rest of the body whipped over, the rattles actually scraping across my shoulders.

Its weight was surprising, but that meant little, for in another split second I had turned my wrist to bring the snake's head inward toward the rock face. Then ensued such another battering and smashing as only a man buried alive might contrive in panic.

I felt the bone smash under my blows, felt the tremors along the squirming body as the jaws turned to splinters.

Then came the reek of the venom, and the sickening smell of snake blood.

Just then my left hand tore free of its grip and dropped me back on the shelf below with my grip still tight about the rattler's neck.

Minutes passed before my senses cleared. I looked down then. The snake's head was nonexistent, except for a few bone splinters and a wad of pulp. I opened my fingers automatically and stared at my trophy.

He was a diamond-back, nearly five feet long, swollen out of normal proportion by the baking distillation of the August sun, probably as complete a mass of venom as hell itself might produce.

Later, when I was calm again, I cut eight rattles from his tail, leaped again for the rimrock, and this time made it without contacting another reptile.

I made my shift in the mine with time to spare. But even today any dry rattling buzz makes me jump!

Reader's Forum*

(Continued from page 1)

HE LIKES FACTS IN HIS FICTION

Congratulations for your September issue! It looks better, and is better.

I read fiction purely for relaxation, but if occasionally I soak up a little knowledge of Geography, Science, or Aircraft, as in the story "Risky Business," so much the better. The interesting novelette "The Free Shall Live" provides an imaginative outline of probable conditions in the Sahara, and helps one to keep up on current history.

A wild and woolly Western, or a detective story, with no particular setting, provides nothing except a momentary thrill, perhaps. Now, I'm no great scholar, avid for facts and figures; but gaining knowledge in the stories BLUE BOOK contains, is a most pleasant way to become more informed about things in general. I'm in favor of more fiction based on probable facts, and fewer fairy tales.

*H. C. Boren,
Springfield, Ill.*

FROM BRAZIL

I am reading the BLUE BOOK with the greatest interest and always waiting for the next copy.

I am interested especially in the stories which deal with mystical things and stories about ancient times.

Methinks that nowadays it is very important to describe men with ideals and brains, who are fighting and suffering for great ideas and who, in spite of many difficulties finally are victorious. Let speak to us the past understood only halfway or not at all.

And don't forget the wild things, the jungles and how men master the difficulties. These stories are very instructive.

All we need today is, in my humble opinion, not to nourish thoughts of revenge, but remember the fine ideas of great men who were fighting for individuality, and who considered all men free and equal. Something that strengthens our hope for a better future, where men can live without fear of war, suppression and murder and robbing and starving. Seems that I am thinking of the Kingdom Come.

And please, don't forget something to laugh about, like the story of "Dr. Fuddle's Fingers." There is nothing better than something to laugh about.

*Recha Hamel,
São Paulo.*

*The Editors of BLUE BOOK are glad to receive letters of constructive criticism and suggestion; for the ones we publish each month we will pay the writers ten dollars each.

Letters should not be longer than two hundred words; no letters can be returned, and all will become property of McCall Corporation. They should be addressed: Editor of Letters, Blue Book Magazine, 230 Park Ave., New York.

Next Month!

THREE SHORT COMPLETE NOVELS

Beyond the Farthest Star

by Edgar Rice Burroughs

Something new from the old master of fantasy—a tale of terrific adventure that is also a sharply significant allegory.

The Hitch-Hike Bride . by Frederick Becholdt

She halted him on the road from Reno—and brought exciting events to his one-man desert mine.

Terror in the Sunlight . . by Michael Gallister

Another tale of wealthy 1941 refugees on the Atlantic, by the author of "Mutiny Takes the Helm," in this issue.

A SPECIAL FEATURE

The Riddle of America's Godfather

by Stefan Zweig

The distinguished historian who gave us "Man's Boldest Adventure" (the story of Magellan) gives an interesting solution to a great historical mystery—why half the world should bear the name of a second-rate explorer who never led an expedition of his own—Amerigo Vespucci!

Also! "The Gate of Mercy," the fourth startling adventure in H. Bedford-Jones' series "Some Call It Luck;" a Tiny David story by Robert Mill; a specially attractive installment of Gordon Keyne's "The Princess and the Prophet;" and many other attractive contributions by such writers as C. E. Scoggins, Raymond Spears, William Porter, Hugh Fullerton and Kenneth Perkins: all in the next, (the January) issue of—

The Blue Book Magazine

BLUE BOOK

Stories of adventure for MEN, by MEN

BLUE BOOK

The Sheriff of Los Blancos, by Peter B. Kyne

He knew when and where to use
weapons, whether a machine-gun,
a .22 or—a subtler arm.

•
The Tramp's Pug Passenger,

by Kerry O'Neil

A skipper deals with the champion of
the Lesser Antilles, and other griefs.

•
The Princess and the Prophet,

by Gordon Keyne

Nostradamus and Mary Queen of Scots
are prominent in this colorful novel.

And many stories by H. Bedford-Jones,
Agatha Christie, William E. Barrett, Gordon
Young and others (see front cover)



BLUE BOOK

Stories of adventure for MEN, by MEN

BLUE BOOK

BLUE BOOK

Stories of adventure for MEN, by MEN

The Sheriff of Los Brancos, by Peter B. Kyne

He knew when and where to use
weapons, whether a machine-gun,
a .22 or—a subtler arm.

**The Tramp's Pug Passenger,
by Kerry O'Neil**

A skipper deals with the champion of
the Lesser Antilles, and other griefs.

**The Princess and the Prophet,
by Gordon Keyne**

Nostradamus and Mary Queen of Scots
are prominent in this colorful novel.

**And many stories by H. Bedford-Jones,
Agatha Christie, William E. Barrett, Gordon
Young and others (see front cover)**



December 25 Cents

A Book-Length Novel, Complete

Forty Whacks by Geoffrey Homes

One was fatal, in this mystery by the
man who gave us "Finders Keepers."

The Remarkable Talent of Egbert Haw

In this veracious chronicle, a talking
race-horse calls "Whoa!" to his rival.
by Nelson Bond

**I Fought Von Richthofen,
by Arch Whitehouse**

A pilot with sixteen victories to his
credit battles the famous Red Baron.

**Mutiny Takes the Helm,
by Michael Gallister**

Refugees taking wealth from America
start another war on the 1941 Atlantic.

And many others (see back cover)